Der Erlkönig

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Der Erlkönig

by ataraxistence

Summary

The year is 1865. Robert Lee has just surrendered at Appomattox; across the Atlantic, uneasy immigrant and Confederate deserter Will Graham works for Queen Victoria's Scotland Yard. While investigating a corpse, Will sees, in Epping Forest, the apparition of a man crowned with antlers and flowers; while investigating the disappearance of thirteen little girls, Will sees Abigail Hobbs, who claims to have been saved and kidnapped by faeries.

Frustrated, Will Graham chooses to seek out London's foremost expert on the occult: Count Hannibal Lecter.

A Victorian AU, roughly inspired by Goethe's poem Der Erlkönig, or The Erl-King, or The Alder King, later made into a mesmerising lieder by Franz Schubert.

Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind.
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

"Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht?" –
"Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?
Den Erlenkönig mit Kron und Schweif?" –
"Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif."

It was… not at all a dark and stormy night, and yet there was fear in the air.

Will could feel it prickling on the back of his neck, despite the good wool scarf he wore. The woods of England were dark and grim, and while there was neither thunder nor lightning, there was a persistent chill in the air fed by a dismal little drizzle that insisted on worming its persistent way past the upturned collar of his greatcoat. Will mused to himself, not for the first time, that this new Old World that he had found himself in was nothing like the warm bayous of Louisiana.

And yet here he was, nonetheless, searching for a dead body with Jack Crawford – now a freedman, Will supposed, like all those like him who were still in America, now that the war had ended beyond any doubt. For a month now, the American community in London had been afire with the news of Robert Lee's surrender at Appomattox; that was not to say, though, that Crawford had ever been anything but free. He had been born and raised in New York, unlike Will.

There were other ways in which they were unlike. For one, Jack Crawford was a stolid man. He was broad-built, barrel-chested and strong, and he heartily enjoyed both food and drink. He had an incisive mind, though little imagination; he paired this with a stout moral compass and a keen sense of what was the decent thing to do. It made him an ideal man of the law, and a good husband to the wife he had followed across the ocean to London, his precious and beautiful Bella – and it had made him save Will Graham, Confederate deserter, when he had stumbled across Will half-dead.

Here, at least, that bit of Will's history didn't matter. London was a *grande dame* of cities, and the gentry of Victorian England were little concerned about the affairs of their upstart once-colony. When Will opened his mouth, his rolling words and the twang of his accent marked him as a foreigner, but the Londoners rarely concerned themselves about where precisely he was from and what that might've meant. And Scotland Yard's Chief Investigator Nathaniel Druscovich had had his own fair share of side-eyeing, for being from faraway

lands himself; he was therefore quite inclined to be kindly disposed towards Will and Jack, so long as they kept his solve rate high for him.

And they did. Will's abilities – which had been such a crippling disadvantage on the battlefield that he had fled before they drove him plumb crazy – were an asset to him here.

Proper people still viewed him askance, of course, and no wonder: with his nervy twitches and his unwillingness to make eye contact, most of respectable London saw him as an addict, perhaps to opiates, perhaps to something stranger. He made it worse with his lack of care for appearances. The days were growing colder and Will often shaved less and less; as a result he currently wore five days' worth of scraggly beard and looked positively dismal. And when he did meet someone's eyes, his steady blue gaze often made people uncomfortable. A flower girl had hit him for it, once – "Quit yer starin', Haymarket Hector," she'd hissed at him, swinging her big bag like a cosh and hustling the littler girls away – so he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't, anyway.

But when it came to solving cases about gruesome murders and missing girls, well, then – Will was your man.

Earl Griswold had come to Scotland Yard to plead the case for his valet's niece, one Amelia Lytton, twelve years old. A kindly old man, he had noticed his valet's growing distraction over the course of a few days; by the fourth day he had wriggled the truth out of the man and without further ado had stormed down to the Yard. And the honest truth was that the Yard paid far more attention to him than they would have had to his valet. It was one thing that Will *did* miss about America. Nonetheless, even on Griswold's insistence, Druscovich hadn't been about to assign too much manpower to a case of a missing girl – this was London. Girls ran away every day, and one more was not something to be too worried about, no matter how much Griswold's valet insisted that his Amelia wasn't that kind of girl.

At least – it hadn't mattered, until Jack's quiet inquiries among the markets of Newgate, Leadenhall, Clare and Farringdon had turned up an increasing list of missing flower sellers and vegetable girls, little urchins and pub maidlings. Most of the girls hadn't had parents, and those who did have someone concerned for their welfare hadn't even bothered with talking to the police, instead choosing to turn to the gangs who ruled London's underbelly – but while one missing girl was one thing, thirteen was quite another. Druscovich was beginning to suspect a child trafficking ring; Jack, far more in tune with the chatterings of London's criminal underworld, had heard nothing to that effect and was thus beginning to suspect a serial killer.

Will, without any bodies, couldn't help.

He shifted on the back of his bay gelding, feeling deeply conflicted about that – he hated feeling useless, but no bodies meant possibly no dead girls. But logically, he knew that odds were not good that all thirteen girls were still alive. If Jack was right – and Jack's mind was sharp as tack and hardly ever wrong – then it was quite possible that all thirteen were dead, and if they could just find *something*, then Will could at least begin the dark, Dantean trek through the imaginative horrors which men could visit upon the innocent, and bring some justice to the dead – some peace to their families.

Which had brought them here to Epping Forest. There had been reports of a dead man, killed gruesomely just that morning, and word had reached London fairly rapidly, but in the time that it had taken two constables to go back to the nearby village and fetch a cart and horse for the body, the corpse had disappeared.

Jack had ridden down in a thunderous rage, arriving in the late afternoon ready to give the relevant constables a tongue-lashing for not leaving at least one person with the body, but had found them so deeply discomfited by their findings that he had restrained himself. The two of them – boys, really, and village ones at that, not like the hardened scalpers of London Town – had described, in halting sentences much smoothened by rough brandy, a scene out of a nightmare. The man had, apparently, been strangled, but his teeth and tongue had been torn out and scattered next to his head, and his fingers had been stripped completely clean of bone –

"Like frenching a rack of lamb," Jack mused. "Why would anyone do that?"

Will had shrugged. He needed to see the body – the halting descriptions that the boys could give weren't enough to form a full mental picture, and they had grown up here and said that the man was a stranger to the village. Jack had wanted to know if he had worn anything unusual, if he had had any identifying marks, whether her boots his showed city habits or country habits, but the two of them hadn't been observant enough to tell or to note it. They had barely been able to tell Jack that he was of average height and stature and had had brown hair, which was as good as nothing at all, frankly.

Will wanted something different – he wanted to know if he had been treated carefully or cruelly, whether this had been a crime of passion or of cold-blooded premeditation, if his death had been an end in itself or something else, perhaps a message or a signal to others. Admittedly, though, this was about a full-grown man in his thirties, not a child. Jack was skeptical as to whether or not this would be relevant to the child disappearances, but such a bloody murder required their attention nonetheless.

Which explained why they were currently riding around in Epping Forest, searching for trails or clues. Winston, the hunting dog which Will had brought with him, had followed some unseen trail for a while, but half an hour ago he had sat down and whined piteously and resolutely refused to go any further. Instead Winston had sat there whimpering, only forcing himself to trot close to the heels of Will's horse when they went too far. It chilled Will – Winston was a good dog, and a brave one – but Jack had merely loosened his pistols in their holsters and continued searching determinedly.

But even Jack Crawford would have to call it quits as the night deepened. The shadows their lanterns threw got deeper and deeper, and the woods were getting darker and darker by the moment. They would have to stay in the nearby village: it was too late to return to the city for the night. The villagers would all be indoors by now, as well – after such a gruesome murder, people would gather, and talk in whispers, and stay with neighbours and lock their children up, as if such measures could keep them safe against some of the monsters that Will had known and helped catch, in the past.

Nonetheless – company and food made people feel better, and he could hardly begrudge them that. Will spared a longing thought for a dark pint and hot pub food – but some fragment of

movement caught his eye and he looked up sharply.

The wind picked up and Winston whimpered, shying even closer to the horse, uncaring of the danger of being kicked in the head. Will laid a calming hand against the neck of his gelding, even as his own heart picked up speed.

“Jack,” Will whispered urgently. “I saw something.”

“Where?” Jack asked, glancing around as he drew the pistol from its holster, raising the lantern higher. It cast a circle of weak, wavering light, and Will hissed at him to put it away. It wasn’t helping. There *was* someone moving out there. He could sense it.

It had dark eyes. It was constantly, quietly on the move, looking at these two intruders – yes, intruders, one dark-skinned and one fair, clutching weapons. The dog was afraid, and the horses were uneasy, shifting from foot to foot. The fair one had a direct gaze, blue, clear as the cleanest spring from the dark heart of the heart, and he could *see*.

These men were not afraid and they smelt of smog and brick and *progress*, although their hearts thumped with nervousness. They were right to be nervous and had they been afraid they would have been right to be so as well. There had been another man last night who had feared, here in the forest, frantic and with a lovely girl clutched possessively to him

– so possessive that he would have squeezed the very life from her –

Will gasped hard, his head reeling for half a second. The moon sliced through and shone down briefly as the clouds scudded by, chased by the angry winds –

And revealed a imposing figure. Will saw him clearly but for half a moment, but that was enough to see him crowned with antlers and flowers, his train flowing from broad shoulders, upright as any man with a blazing look in his eyes that gored Will to the heart –

Will cried out and wrenched his gaze away, pressing his face into his shoulder to avoid those bladed eyes, and when he could bring himself to tear his eyes open again, Jack was crowded close to him, demanding, “What, Will? What happened?”

“That man,” Will gasped, glancing back to the clearing where he could still see the figure receding into the trees, the regal back to them. “There, Jack!”

Jack Crawford whirled, then turned back to Will. “Where?”

“Right there!’ Will yelped, his voice rising with Winston’s now-panicked barks.

“There’s no one *there*, Will!” shouted Jack Crawford.

“You can’t see him?” Will demanded, flabbergasted, backing the horse away a few steps. Winston following, his ears still flat to his head, his lips pulled back in a snarl, his barking settled into a steady, low, angry growl. The silhouette was almost entirely gone from view now, and Will felt the evening return to normalcy – still, cold, yes, but without the bone-chill of fear now that that apparition had gone. The apparition that, clearly, only Will had seen.

“Only the mist, Will,” Jack Crawford said dubiously.

“Only the mist,” Will echoed blankly.

Chapter End Notes

My favourite recording of the Schubert lieder is by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and you can find it here. It tells the story of a man who carries his child through the woods at night; all the while, the child sees the Erl-king beckoning to him while his father sees nothing at all.

The translation of the first two stanzas which I have included at the start are as follows (some poetic license taken, my German is not tremendously good):

Narrator: Who rides so swift, through the night and the wind? Look, it is the father and his child.
He holds the child tight in his arms, he has him securely and he keeps him warm.

Father: My son, why do you hide your face thus?
Child: Do you not see him, Father? Do you not see the Erl-king?
See you not the Erl-king, with crown and cloak?
Father: My son, 'tis but a streak of fog.

I will continue to add translations as different stanzas of the poem show up. Next up: Will encounters Abigail Hobbs... and seeks out Hannibal Lecter.

I hope you've enjoyed the work so far; if you have, please leave me a comment, kudos, or add a bookmark! If you have any errors to point out or any criticisms to make, please do let me know as well. :) Thank you!

sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind

Chapter Summary

Will meets Abigail Hobbs, who comes to him with an interesting tale about Faerie.

Chapter Notes

Thank you very much for all your kind comments: the response to this little fic has been lovely so far and I really appreciate it. I'm not in the habit of responding to comments, I'm afraid, but I assure you that read them all and am very grateful for them! We're proceeding at a slower pace than I would have expected - I apologise for the fact that Hannibal won't show up until next chapter, or even later, depending on the demands on the narrative. In return I promise that when they meet it will be worth your patience. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!
Gar schöne Spiele spiel' ich mit dir;
Manch' bunte Blumen sind an dem Strand,
Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand." –

"Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörest du nicht,
Was Erlenkönig mir leise verspricht?" –
"Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind;
In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind." –

Will rubbed the crusted sleep from his eyes as he splashed his face from the basin of water that had been laid out for him. His nightclothes were soaked through with sweat, rapidly cooling in the chill of a foggy London morning. The nightmares were getting worse and worse – and again and again they featured that mysterious figure crowned with antlers, which Jack Crawford had not seen.

Will wondered, sometimes, if he was going mad.

“Mr Graham! Breakfast,” came the cheerful call, interrupting his reverie. Will dressed hurriedly – the smell of bacon and eggs and devilled kidneys was beginning to waft upwards, and Will hastened his footsteps at the thought of hearty, solid food.

Beverly Katz grinned at him. A woman of Asiatic descent, she had retained her husband's name when he died (in circumstances which were still unclear to Will); she also ran a respectable, solid boardinghouse on Dean Street for men like himself, primarily foreigners seeking their fortune in London. Her cooking was plain but good, she never cheated anyone, and was a shrewd judge of character, which made her an unusual gem in the squalor and general seediness of the West End.

"Morning," he mumbled, sitting down at the table and taking the bread-and-butter she handed him, shoveling eggs onto his plate from the communal platter.

"Morning," she greeted. "Long night, hmm?"

"Yes," Will sighed around his mouthful. He'd stayed up late by the light of a guttering candle, poring over reports and interviews with the families of the missing girls, wondering, desperately, if there were commonalities. They had all looked reasonably alike – brown-haired, brown-eyed, neat and appealing in their eleven-year-old ways though not always pretty. Will agreed with Jack that this wasn't human trafficking. The pattern didn't fit – a trafficker would grab girls of every type – and Will had the terrible feeling that these girls were fitting into a *template* – that somewhere out there, there was an original. All the others were made and taken in her image.

"Any luck finding those girls?" she asked.

"No," Will said ruefully. "But there have been no more missing," he added. A week since the Epping Forest debacle, that was the only comfort that Will could take. That male corpse had never been found, so they had refocused their efforts on the girls. Druscovich was facing increasing pressure from Griswold, and that meant that Will and Jack were facing increasing pressure from Druscovich. The only thing that could make it worse would be if the penny papers got a hold of the news. Given Will's luck, it would surely occur any day now.

"That's a good thing," Beverly mused, heaping kidneys onto Will's plate. He made a face, but quailed at her fierce look. She was forever insisting that Will ought to eat more, that he was malnourished and too skinny for his own good. "But you want to catch this crook, eh."

"Of course," Will said, sighing.

"Well, good luck," she said, and her eyes were kind. "I hope it all works out, Will."

"Me too," Will said, knowing that it wasn't going to be that easy.

It wasn't that easy.

He and Jack had barely settled down to their desks when the duty sergeant came banging in, yelling for them. Startled, Jack hastily swallowed his gulp of coffee; Will was not so lucky – he spilt it down his shirt front, and swore loudly as the heat of the liquid hit his skin. But the sergeant's next words drew his mind entirely away from his scalded chest.

“Gotta bird out front who sez she knows where to find ‘em missing girls, sir.”

“What?!” Jack roared. “Bring her in!”

When she did come in, she was a tall, slender girl of about sixteen, Will estimated, dressed neatly in a dark purple riding habit with the jacket trimmed neatly with Chantilly lace. Her dark hair was braided and her face was shaded by an extravagant little top hat perched precariously to the side of her head, trimmed with an artificial silk flower in dark blue and purple, with a little veil of dark lace shading her face.

Jack invited her to sit, looking about uneasily for her guardian. She caught his look and said, quite calmly, “I came alone, sir. My name is Abigail Hobbs.”

“You say you know where the missing girls are.”

“Yes,” she said. “In Blystshire, just north of London – you know where it is?” A constable was already nodding, writing furiously. “He kept them there. I will ride with you. We can get to Blystshire within the day, and then we will have to go to the woods, but the path to the cabin where he kept – keeps – them is not easy to find unless you know it’s there.”

“He?” Will asked, leaning forward. Her brown eyes met his fearlessly.

“Yes, it was my father. Garrett Jacob Hobbs, a shoemaker,” she said, coldly and softly. “He’s dead now, though, and you won’t find him again.”

“Ms Hobbs – this is most irregular,” Jack began. “You say that your father kept these girls? How did you come to know all this? How can I be sure that you’re not just wasting our time?” It didn’t take the smartest of minds to understand that Jack had already begun to suspect the girl as at least somewhat complicit in her father’s affairs, and Will suppressed a wince. He wanted to tell Jack not to antagonise her – after all, this was their only lead.

Instead, though, something about his hostility set her at ease. She turned a small but genuine smile on the two of them, and said, “You will believe me when we find the girls. And on the way, gentlemen, I will tell you a tale that will defy all belief.”

The scepticism must have shown in Will’s face, because her grin became fiercer, darker. “I will tell you that up until a week ago I was only a little girl of eleven.”

Will could feel his face changing to “stunned” against his better intentions, and Jack’s mouth gaped like a hooked fish. He looked ready to hurl invective, but the way Abigail Hobbs spoke stopped him – it suggested good breeding and fine manners, and she had said it with such assured certainty. As the silence stretched between them, she took the opportunity and filled it again: “Five long years have passed for me – but it’s not too late for the last of the girls he took. Shall we hurry, good sirs?”

The station erupted into action, and Abigail Hobbs swept out like a queen.

Half an hour saw them at a steady trot out of London. Abigail rode with consummate ease, controlling her own horse without the touch of the whip, using simple pats and even the

occasional verbal commands to suggest pace and direction to her chestnut mare. In an unspoken accord, Will drew level with her and Jack fell back – it was time to find out a little more about the mysterious Miss Abigail Hobbs, they both felt.

“Will we find them alive?”

She sighed, and the sound of her sigh was like wind in the willows by some nameless stream. “I hope so,” she said. “They will not have been fed for a week. There is water in the well near the cabin, but he locked them in, so they would not escape.”

“What did your father do with them, Abigail?” Will asked gently.

She drew in a deep breath, then looked Will in the eye as she said: “He ate them.”

The recoil must have shown on his face, because she went on relentlessly. “And he fed them to my mother and me. He told us it was game meat, but now I know the truth of what he did.”

Will seized on the opening. “And how did you find out what he did?”

“You may find it difficult to believe, Mr Graham,” she said steadily.

“Try me,” Will insisted. Being part of the police force had given him insight into all kinds of strange and terrible happenings.

She smiled mirthlessly at him. “I was taken by fairies,” she said. “And after a long while, when they thought me old enough to understand, they told me the truth.”

Will considered this for a moment. He had his face better under control this time, but nonetheless, he said, “Well, let us assume that I believe you for now, Miss Hobbs, what– ” he broke off, for she was shaking her head.

“Abigail, please,” she said. “I have no wish to be reminded that I am my father’s daughter.”

“Abigail, then,” Will acquiesced. “If you say you were taken by fairies, why are you here?”

“Because I didn’t want the other girls to die.” As simple as that. “At first, when they told me, I thought it was too late. But Faerie… the lands of the Other Folk are different. Time runs differently there, you understand?”

Will had heard the folklore before, and nodded, fascinated despite himself. It struck him as fanciful, that in the age of steam and steel this girl was speaking of fairies in broad daylight. But there was something about her grave mien that drew his attention and his belief.

“So I asked them how long I had been gone, the other side of the veil. And they told me, but seven days, and so I asked to be let out.” There was resolve in her dark eyes. “I wanted to save them, just as I’d been saved before.”

“Who did you ask to let you out?” Will asked. “Even if they’d saved you, they had no right to hold you against your will, Abigail.”

“It wasn’t for so long. It was just a few days or so, right?”

“But years for you, clearly.”

She smiled wryly. “Those were good years.”

She hooked the reins around her left hand and brought her right hand up; swiftly she undid the buttons of her high collar. Will blushed for a moment before what he was seeing registered for him: there was a long, slender line drawn right across her neck. Without even a second look, Will knew that the wound would have been fatal. For a moment his imagination assaulted him with the image: this lovely young girl with her throat gaping wide, gushing blood in every direction across his hands –

He must have made a choked sound, because Jack rode up and Abigail Hobbs turned to show him her closed wound, smiling a mirthless little smile. Jack’s face paled, and she quietly did up her collar again, closing away that dreadful scar.

“They saved me,” she repeated. “They had no need to. They could have taken any other little girl who caught their fancy, and you would never have found her. You couldn’t even track my father down, so you would have had no hope against *them*. But when my father rode through, and they realised what he had done, they killed him and saved me.”

“Who are *they*, Abigail?” Jack demanded.

“The Lord and ladies of Faerie, of course,” she said softly. “The Erl-king and his daughters. The leaders of the Wild Hunt.”

Every single hair on the nape of Will’s neck stood up. *The Erl-king*, he thought, and the crowned figure flashed before his eyes again.

Amelia Lytton.

Tabitha Hargreaves.

Susie Potts.

They were the lucky ones, Will thought bleakly, surveying the two corpses which had been hung to bleed dry. Thirteen girls missing. Three alive, and two bodies. Eight that Garrett Jacob Hobbs had devoured. Perhaps he had given the bones to his hunting hounds, let them crack the bones and feast on the marrow. Perhaps nearby the constables would find a shallow grave.

Jack had busied himself with the logistics, ordering around the constables who had come from London, gathering evidence. Abigail had gathered some women from the village – she called herself Rosamund Pike, instead, which was wise, considering that otherwise her miraculously aged return would have drawn far more attention. She had marshaled them into bringing the girls weak beef tea and shreds of bread, along with a judicious amount of brandy

for the shock; the three live girls were at the village recovering from the ordeal under the watchful eye of about twelve local women.

Will closed his eyes and breathed deep. There was no need for this, technically – the case had been solved, the girls found, and he was certain now, even without proof, that that male body that had been found at Epping Forest was Abigail's father, Garrett Jacob Hobbs. There was no need for Will to look at the two little girls hung up in their nightgowns.

But he had to do this, to bear witness.

And suddenly he was filled with an almost unbearable ache in his heart. It pierced him, drove him on with its fury, led him to snatch little girls off the streets in London.

He kept them here for a while, played with them and soothed them as best as he could. He told them lies – that their parents were in danger, that they had asked him to bring them here and take care of them for a while – and he killed them, quietly, one by one.

Often he would drug them to sleep and then quietly slit their throats. And for a while, as he butchered and ate them, he felt less alone. The ache in his heart lessened at the idea that they would be with him for a while longer – a part of him forever, in some way.

And at the heart of that ache was love.

Will surfaced, gasping, only to find Abigail by his side. She regarded him steadily for a moment, and then said in a conversational tone, "There is a hall, in Faerie, where they let me stay. They call it the Hall of Last Resort, and there are little windchimes set in a high window above my bedroom, which sometimes make noises even when no winds blow."

Despite himself Will shuddered.

"And those windchimes," Abigail continued, "are the bones of my father, and the Erl-king hung them so that he would make music and comfort me in times of fear or sorrow."

"How can you –"

"How can I speak so calmly of my father's murder?" she asked, putting her head to one side. Will imagined the skin of her graceful neck creasing alongside the scar as she tilted her head, and abruptly knew the answer.

"You feared him," he said, his tongue lying thick in his mouth. "You knew something was wrong, and you tried to get away, which is why he killed you."

"It's why they took me in. Do you think the Erl-king cares often for the fate of a mortal girl?"

Her voice turned wistful. "I saw nothing once the knife cut my throat. And I saw nothing until I woke on a bank covered in little golden flowers. And it was three years before I was brought to his court and allowed to dance." Her eyes flickered to Will, and there was wistfulness in her gaze. "I was allowed to dance all night, that night. That night I did not need the windchimes to help me fall asleep. Ever since then they have been silenced."

Will couldn't reply – instead, he shut his eyes for a second. Behind his lids the image of the two dead girls faded, to be replaced with a tall building of stone, and the faint strains of heartbreaking music, and Abigail dancing gently across a patterned floor even as starlight burned in the torch scones on the wall. A man stepped forward and offered her his hand – and Will did not know if it was her father, or some nameless man of Faerie, or Will himself –

Or the Erl-king, resplendent in crown and robe, and suddenly *Will* was the one standing in Abigail's place, taking a graceful step backwards in the opening movements of a waltz –

Jack's shout of "Will! We're leaving!" broke his reverie, and left him feeling both hot and cold, trembling where he stood.

They stayed at the village a little longer, waiting for the girls to regain some of their strength. It was dark by the time the girls were deemed strong enough to travel, but Jack eventually decided that it would be best to head back to London immediately, so that the girls could be reunited with their parents sooner.

They were asleep now, covered in a scratchy blanket in the back of a horse-drawn cart. Griswold would be happy – Will counted it as fortunate that Amelia Lytton had been amongst the live ones.

But a great weariness rose up in him at the thought of the dreariness that would follow: they would have to tell the grieving families, and hear their recriminations; the press would get wind of if and there would be pompous articles from those who sat fat and prosperous in their armchairs and criticised the inadequate efforts of the Yard. The lurid penny papers would be full of gruesome details of the cannibalism of this case. People would look at the streets of London askance, and hold their children close for a time, and invariably they would forget and it would all begin again.

"You're very tired, aren't you, Mr Graham," came Abigail's soft voice, from behind him.

"Yes, but call me Will," Will answered shortly. And Abigail - what would she do? Mrs Katz might take her in for a while. Will wondered if she had need for a parlourmaid, or if she knew a lady who would take Abigail into service, and how, if it was at all possible, to explain away her involvement in all this, and the fantastical explanations that she had brought him -

"You see it, don't you. What they see, when they kill and when they die."

Will froze at her words, then forced himself to relax as the horse whickered softly in confusion under him. Jack knew, of course. When he had first found Will, Will had been delirious from the visions, unsure if he was still whole or if he had been torn to pieces by the firing of muskets, the cries of the dead ringing in his head over and over as he clutched desperately at his sense of being himself, feverish and shaky. But since coming to London, no one knew of the way he could penetrate into the hearts and minds of others; into the darknesses of murderers and the lost. The rumours swirled around him at Scotland Yard, of course, but Druscovich didn't question and Will didn't volunteer.

"They of Faerie know of people like you," Abigail said. "People with the Sight."

"I don't have the Sight," Will scoffed, infusing the words with the scorn that people had heaped on him all his life. "I just have an... overactive imagination."

"Or maybe everyone else with the Sight just had an overactive imagination too," Abigail said. "Calling it something else will not change its nature. But Will, its nature is not yours. *Their* nature is not yours."

"It could be," he confessed, feeling the chill in his heart both lessen and grow stronger at speaking the words aloud.

She was silent for a while, considering. Their horseshoes rang into the cold night air, and the moon shone palely down upon them.

When she spoke again, her voice was different.

"I think you are a kinder man than you think yourself, Will," she said. “But I must say goodbye to you for now.”

"What?" Will demanded, twisting around in the saddle - but a sharp "No!" from her seemed to freeze his body in place. "Don't turn around, Will," she commanded.

"No, Abigail," he pleaded. None of the others turned around, or even gave any indication that they had heard.

"I have to go, Will," she said. "It was lovely to meet you. Thank you for listening to me, and for looking - for all of us."

"Abigail!" Will shouted, straining to turn around with every muscle and sinew in his body.

"Farewell," she murmured.

Will, with a roar of frustration, wrenched himself around with a full jerk of his body, tumbling from his horse as he did so –

It was as though the ground was falling away. Abigail and her mare were not moving, they were simply standing at the centre of a great wind or an earth-shaking movement, being borne backwards, out of Will’s reach –

"No!" He lunged after them, but to no avail. For a moment she looked surprised and fond, and then out of the shadows stepped a tall and shadowy figure - crowned in antlers and a fresh cascade of wisteria.

Abigail turned to the figure and curtsied low before speaking. For the barest of seconds, Will felt eyes on him, both pairs of eyes, one human and one Fae –

And then they were both gone, and Will was left to face Jack and the convoy, who had finally stopped at his shouts.

"She's gone, Jack - we have to go after them," he blurted, knowing even as he said it that it was pointless - how would he get a hold of them?

Jack's eyes were worried as he cantered over and gripped Will's shoulder.

"Who's gone, Will?" he asked carefully.

And Will, momentarily struck speechless, could do nothing but gape at him in frustration.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Will just can't catch a break!

This week's snatch of poetry:

The Erl-King: Oh, lovely child! Come, come along with me
And we will play games and have such fun!
Many flowers are upon my riverbank
and my mother shall dress you in cloth of shining gold.

Son: My father, my father! And do you not hear
what the Erl-king whispers in my ear?
Father: Be calm, stay calm, my child -
'tis but the wind stirring the dusty willows.

Again, I hope you've enjoyed the work so far; if you have, please leave me a comment, kudos, or add a bookmark! If you have any errors to point out or any criticisms to make, please do let me know as well. :) Thank you!

du kennst die Toten

Chapter Summary

Will attempts to do a little investigating of the mystery of Abigail and the disappearing corpse of Epping Forest, and meets a lovely, determined young woman at the Library of the British Museum.

Chapter Notes

This week's snatch of German poetry is from Rilke, and is the sixteenth of his Sonnets to Orpheus. I think Will might appreciate the idea of a descent into the underworld, if only one of the mind.

I very much appreciate everyone's response thus far! I may also, come the fourth chapter, put up an appendix describing the sources and notes for this fic. For instance, a number of these characters and places are very real, but of course I've taken some liberties with it, and some things are downright fictional, of course. Would anyone be interested in notes describing what's what? Let me know in the comments if that's something you would be keen on - or if you feel that my academic-y bibliography might detract from the reading instead. Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Du, mein Freund, bist einsam, weil...
Wir machen mit Worten und Fingerzeigen
uns allmählich die Welt zu eigen
vielleicht ihren schwächsten, gefährlichsten Teil.

Wer zeigt mit Fingern auf einen Geruch?
Doch von den Kräften, die uns bedrohten,
fühlst du viele... Du kennst die Toten
und du erschrickst vor dem Zauberspruch.

At just past midnight, the beer house *The Princess Elizabeth* was filled with the rough talk and shouts of the costermongers. Tobacco smoke filled the air and pints were slopped on the floor as men played cards – “Fifteen four and a flush of five… I’m high, I’m game… Jed’s on a low streak tonight…” – and yelled for more beer. In the corner a sparring match was beginning to start: two boys had had a friendly quarrel, and the crowd was slowly forming a

ring around them, encouraging them to “punch it out, lads, punch it out”, and the slow anticipation of careful violence was building in the room.

Will and Jack, as policemen, should have been the natural enemies of the costermongers, but Jack had done the barkeep a favour in a tight spot before, and this was a good place to go unheard and unlooked for. And after the day they’d had, he wanted to talk to Will somewhere where no one would listen. They weren’t constables in the uniform of the enemy, and this was one of the (not many) places where a black man wouldn’t be looked at particularly askance.

“How did we save those girls, then?” Will demanded.

Jack sighed. It would have been good to have an answer for that himself, but he wasn’t so much of a fool that he wouldn’t admit that there was something strange about the whole situation. It was just that…

Will was off-balance, that much he knew. Had always been, even from the day that Jack found him shivering and strung-out somewhere outside of himself in a barn, looking fit for nothing but the madhouse. But he’d grabbed Jack and said, “Help me,” and so Jack had.

And no one, least of all Jack himself, would say that Will hadn’t done more than enough to repay the favour a dozen times over, not the least since coming to London and landing this position with the Yard. And so Jack trusted Will’s instincts, and Will had stuck to his fairy story with dogged consistency. Even before they’d left the station, Will had worn him down a little.

At least enough to convince him that Will wasn’t mad.

“So we had a tip-off,” Jack began again, starting yet once more from the point that he had clear in his mind.

Will nodded impatiently. “From who?”

“Jacobs wrote it down.”

“But– ”

“But Jacobs is new to the force,” Jack agreed. It was true. Jacobs had joined all of four days ago – he had no snitches and he he wasn’t out on patrol, so he must have been in the station.

“Jacobs remembers a girl telling him,” Will continued.

“But I don’t remember a girl,” Jack said. “And Jacobs remembers nothing about her, and none of the rest us remember seeing her either. Except you.”

“And how did we know how to get to the cabin?” Will demanded relentlessly.

It was a good point. Blystshire woods had been dense enough, and the cabin set far enough in, but Jack knew that only a day had gone by. They had gone straight through the forest and right for those girls, and thank the good Lord that they had got them out in time, faster than

anything. Something *had* guided them. And while Bella would have said it was divine purpose, he was willing to believe Will that it wasn't necessarily the Father, the Son or the Holy Ghost.

"*Think*, Jack."

Jack took a gulp of the last of his beer and frowned. "Look, Will – I get it. There's something not quite right about this case. But you're telling me that *fairies* are involved in this?"

Will braced his elbows on the table – which was an error, because Jack knew it was sticky and disgusting – and braced his head in exasperation. The plump barmaid wandered by them, carrying an armful of mugs; she gestured at Jack's empty one with a questioning jerk of her head and he nodded thankfully at her.

"Look, Jack, I know how stupid this all sounds. But I swear to God, there was a girl called Abigail Hobbs who told us where the girls were, and she vanished. Just like that corpse from Epping Forest did. And she told me – told *you,* in fact – that she'd been kidnapped by fairies."

"Look, Will, I can't take that to Druscovich."

"I don't care what you take to Druscovich," Will snapped. "Tell him what he wants to hear. But there's something going on here, Jack, and a human girl's gone missing, and a man's been killed, and there are eight families who've lost their little girls and there's no godsdamned culprit to show for it. You've *got to believe me*."

The skepticism must have lingered on his face still – really, *fairies?* – because Will sighed, all the fight rushing out of him. The barmaid came back with his beer and set it down in front of him.

Jack thanked her and took a fortifying gulp.

They sat staring at each other for what felt like half a minute before Will said tiredly, "Jack. Is it that hard to believe that there are things we might not know about? Things that we might not recognise or understand? After all that we've seen men do – isn't it easy enough to believe that there might be monsters out there?"

Goddamnit.

"Say I believe you, Will, goddamnit," Jack replied, sagging with frustration. It wasn't possible not to believe him. Will Graham had abilities that Jack had never seen in any other goddamned man, and he didn't envy Will his capacities, but bloody hell if he was going to start distrusting him now. "What do you want us to do?"

Will's eyes were determined. "We're policemen, Jack. We'll investigate."

Investigating brought Will to the hushed grandeur of the British Museum's library collection, hoping for any useful works. The Greek façade of the South entrance loomed down upon him

as he stood in the forecourt, feeling small; across the top of the building, the sculptures of the Progress of Man remained enraptured in their own affairs, ignoring Will entirely.

Will stood there for a moment, looking at the Angel of Enlightenment tantalisingly holding out the Lamp of Knowledge, but he was shaken out of his reverie by a portly old man calling out: "Hello there! Is that Mr Will Graham, of Scotland Yard?"

The few stragglers in the courtyard instinctively shied away at the mention of the Yard, but when Will waved back, the little old man simply hurried over. "I see you're absorbed in our terrible statuary," he said cheerfully. "I always felt that they were a little too obvious, but Sir Richard adored the idea. So! My name is Anthony Panizzi, and I am Principal Librarian to the British Museum. What brings you here, Mr Graham?"

"I'm investigating something–"

"Oh, an American!"

"Yes," Will answered, a little resigned to the typical questions about his background, which he could see coming.

But Panizzi simply twinkled at him. "I was from Italy, you know. I've been here forty years now, but some people never quite let me forget that…

"Well, but I got my way in many things," he said quite cheerfully. "Now, what is it that you're looking for?"

"Works to do with the occult," Will said. "Primarily any books which may deal with legends of the Fair Folk, and how to track or find them."

"Well, you could do worse than starting with the Keightley," Panizzi mused to himself. "We have the 1850 expanded edition, I'll give you that one. And there's the Kirk – you know Sir Walter Scott's works? Oh, yes, I see, very good, a reader, then… Sir Walter published a work titled *The Secret Commonwealth* just fifty years or so ago, but it's actually a substantially older work. They say that Kirk – Robert Kirk, the actual author, you know – was taken by the Faerie Queen to be her chaplain after he died."

"Stories of that sort would be useful."

"What, stories of corpses disappearing?" Panizzi asked, slightly taken aback.

"Stories of *people* disappearing."

"Oh, I see," Panizzi said, and dropped his voice. They were striding through the great halls of the museum a a reasonably fast pace for such an old man; prior to that his voice, still booming and indefatigable despite his age, had been loud enough to drown out their footfalls. Now the sound of heel to floor resonated loudly in the marble silence. "Forgive an old man's enthusiasm – that was rather unseemly of me. I forget that you are not here simply for love of knowledge. There have been people gone missing, then?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

“Unfortunate indeed, especially if the Fair Folk are involved,” Panizzi sighed. “Well, let me give you a carrel in the Reading Room – come, this way!” He gestured Will down the hall. As they reached the end of the corridor, he smiled again, visibly shaking off the sombre mood and regaining his enthusiasm. It was with an almost comical flourish that he opened the door. “Well, what do you think of our lovely Reading Room?”

The old librarian had been so kind that even if Will had hated it, he wouldn’t have said so; as it was, though, the Reading Room was truly lovely. Even so, all awkward Will could summon up was a slightly stilted “It’s very beautiful,” but Panizzi beamed as though he had just sung a paean to the library’s arching dome, its golden sunlit silence, its peaceful smell of dusty books. “Isn’t it just,” he said, and hustled Will over to a little desk and chair in its own nook. “Now, just wait here, and I will get your books. You will have to fill out this form–” he brandished a piece of paper at Will – “This is for keeping good records so that I know who you are.” And without further ado he bustled off, leaving Will clutching the paper.

“Mr Panizzi is a veritable force of nature,” came a wry, feminine alto, and Will glanced to the side to see that in the carrel next to his was a woman, who had long, dark hair in loose waves – in defiance of the fashion for tight curls – and strong, sharp features. They were softened by a rosebud mouth, currently wearing a quirked smile, and the wearer got up and extended her right hand – not to be kissed, but to be shaken. Will stumbled clumsily to his feet and reciprocated the gesture, and she smiled and took his hand, shaking it thrice quite firmly. “Alana Bloom. It’s very nice to meet you, Mr…”

“Will Graham,” Will supplied.

“Oh, an American!”

God, Will was getting a little tired of that phrase.

Something of that must have shown on his face, because she laughed and withdrew. “So, Mr Will Graham, I shan’t harass you with demands to know about America. Tell me what you are here to study instead. I rarely see a man of my own age here – most of those who come are as old as Mr Panizzi – in soul if not in body,” she added, grinning.

“Fairy lore,” Will answered.

“An awkward area of scholarship,” she noted. “Or are you a novelist, come looking for inspiration for the next *A Christmas Carol*?”

“Neither. I’m a detective with Scotland Yard.”

“Oh?”

“I’m afraid I can’t really –”

“Oh, of course,” she said quickly. “I’m awfully sorry, you must think me very rude and intrusive.”

“Certainly not,” Will said, blushing, but was saved from having to make further reply by the return of Mr Panizzi, carrying an armload of books. He leapt up to take some of them from him, and Mr Panizzi huffed out a quick word of thanks.

“I see you’ve already made the acquaintance of our Miss Bloom,” Mr Panizzi said. Even hushed, his voice was exuberant. “She is the flower in the dust of the Reading Room – and what a flower you are, my dear,” he added to her, even as she demurred, laughing. “She’s studying medicine, so that one day she’ll be able to treat old, wheezing windbags like myself. Got her license already, haven’t you, Miss Bloom?”

“Yes, I have, Mr Panizzi. But I don’t think they’ll let anyone else do it, after I passed their examination. The Society of Apothecaries,” she said in an aside to Will.

“Well, well done to you, I say,” Panizzi whisper-boomed, and patted Will genially on the shoulder. He meant it well, but Will still had to try not to flinch at the unexpected contact. “Well, good luck, Mr Graham. Do let me know if you need anything more.” And saying so, he strolled off.

“A doctor, huh,” Will noted, turning back to Miss Bloom. “You must be very accomplished, then.”

“More than some but less than others,” she said, smiling. “Well, Mr Graham, I must get back to my studies, and I shall let you get back to yours.”

Will nodded and settled back down, pulling the Keightley closer. He found himself simultaneously relieved and disappointed that she had chosen to end their conversation (albeit gracefully), but soon the dense language drew every last ounce of his concentration.

He lost himself in the words, and was only drawn up from the dark waters again when Miss Bloom tapped the desk in front of him lightly. Will realised that she must have noted his dislike of contact, from that suppressed little flinch earlier, and she rose in his estimation.

“I wanted to ask how you were doing,” she said half-apologetically. “Have you made much headway?”

“Not really,” Will confessed. The material was dense, complicated, patchy and often contradictory in places; Keightley was a folklorist, not a detective. It was too much to expect that the clues to what Will had seen would leap at him immediately. “But I figure coming to grips with the literature will be useful.”

“Perhaps it will be, but only if you do not starve yourself to death. I was considering a bit of dinner: they have lit the lamps, it is past six, and I feel certain you have not had lunch, not to say anything of tea.”

“How’d you know?” Will said, a little sheepishly.

She grinned, and it brought a girlish note of impishness back to a face of strong character. “Only because I have not had any either. Shall we go to Albion’s? It’s not far, and they have yet to refuse to seat me so long as I am accompanied.”

Will flushed. “Well, when you put it that way, I suppose I have no choice but to accompany you.”

The minute the words escaped his mouth, he wished he could have bit them back – it sounded more churlish and surly than he meant, and surely such a lovely lady was accustomed to far more politeness than what he was giving her at the moment. “Not that it’s a burden at all,” he hastily amended, and as the amusement in her dark eyes grew, he gave up, burying his face in his hands with a little groan.

“If you have quite finished digging a hole for yourself, Mr Graham,” she said dryly. “Let us be off – I’m starving!”

Will had not been to the Albion before: as a rule he ate cheap at chop houses. But that would hardly do for Miss Bloom, and in fact, the head waiter *did* give him a dirty look for not being properly dressed for dinner, but Will had been glared by the best of London, and let it slide off him.

Miss Bloom, at any rate, was a known quantity here, perhaps because of its ten-minute-walk’s worth of proximity to the British Museum, where she cheerfully confessed she spent most of her time. They greeted her with familiarity, and the two of them were ushered to a quiet, white-clothed table in one of the smaller dining rooms, which were decorated in blue and white wallpaper and dark wood. Will reflected that was probably to ensure that other patrons were not as offended by the sheer sight of Will’s scruffiness as the waiter himself was.

The waiter brought them the *table d’hôte* menu without asking – it was clear enough that Will wasn’t exactly in good financial standing. London waiters, Will realised, were astute that way, and had a better grasp of social snobbery than the richest American ever could. But there was no hint of insult on their faces, and they ordered soup, filet of sole, saddle of lamb with asparagus, and kirsch jelly in quick succession. Over solid helpings of food – he hadn’t thought himself hungry, but once he had taken the first bite he found himself ravenous – Will observed his charming and unusual dinner companion.

He asked about her work – he was rather less likely to put his foot in his mouth again if *she* was talking – and was quite genuinely fascinated by her answers, even though he could not follow once she started talking about hearing John Snow speak about the nature of cholera.

“It must be primarily microbial in nature – I’m convinced that Doctor Snow had the right of it, for all that the talking heads on Harley Street seem unwilling to believe him,” she said, and cut off a piece of meat with a vicious flourish, before recalling herself and smiling ruefully at Will. “But enough of myself. Tell me about your fairy research. What exactly are you looking for?”

“Tales of abduction, primarily: especially of children. Of which there are a large number.”

“As a woman of science, I’m beholden to tell you that there is probably no such thing as fairy abduction,” she chaffed gently. “Wouldn’t you say that it was much more likely that those

children were kidnapped, or that they simply died from one course or another?"

"Of course you would say that, but as a man of the police force I'm rather required to consider all possibilities."

"And you think that fairy abduction is a real possibility in this case? Why?"

"Nothing else would fit," Will answered. He did not find himself inclined to tell her what he had seen. He had had a pleasant evening thus far, in her company, and did not want to see the light of interest and amusement in her eyes turn to pity or sympathy. "There's something strange about the nature of these cases."

"Well, what we currently term the supernatural or the occult may simply be something that science has yet to properly discover and address," she allowed. "And if one is to believe in God, one may well have to believe in fairies and demons as well."

"And you believe in God?"

"I am aware of the works of the secularist movement. But I have not yet made up my mind as to whether I quite share their beliefs. And are you a religious man, Mr Graham?"

"I try not to think too much about God," Will confessed. "He unnerves me."

"As it should be, I think. But sometimes I feel that we go about our lives and think far too little about God and his designs for us."

"But when a small child goes missing and is later found dead, whose *design* is that?" Will asked harshly, and then dropped his eyes immediately. "I'm sorry, I misspoke."

"No, no, it's a good question," she said. "You remind me of a friend of mine, actually. And in fact – I can't believe I didn't think about this sooner, but if you're looking for information on the occult, you could do worse than looking him up."

"Oh?"

"Yes, his name is Count Lecter – Count Hannibal Lecter. He's from Eastern Europe, actually – Lithuania, and is considered an expert on supernatural research and occult lore from those who are in the know about these things. You should speak to him," she repeated. "Give me a card and I'll write his address down for you. You may tell him that I sent you."

"You're close with this Count Lecter, then?" Immediately, Will winced – that could so easily be taken in the wrong manner, and he had not meant any insult.

"Only in the most correct way possible," she said gently. "He is a man of unusual talents and beliefs – he qualified as a physician, though of course he does not practice. But he was surprisingly willing to tutor me, and that makes him a rarity amongst men. Besides that, he is also fashionable, and eccentric, and rich, and impeccably correct, which has made him an invaluable ally to me. I owe a great deal to Count Lecter."

"Yes, of course," Will said awkwardly.

“On to better topics, then,” she said. “What did you think of Mr Dickens’ latest installment of *Our Mutual Friend*? I do feel positively terrible for Lizzie sometimes.”

He put Miss Bloom in a hansom before setting out to walk back to his lodgings, but before he could start off, though, he was accosted by a little boy with a grubby face and a wary look in his eye.

“I ’ears you talkin’ to the lady. You the American mutton-shunter?”

“Yes,” Will replied shortly. “What do you want?”

“The black one sez ’e wants you down at Covent Garden,” the kid said. “At th’ Opera Hawse.”

Will hurried.

When he arrived, the police had cordoned off the theatre, but a crowd of curious onlookers had gathered already, as though the spirits of London had sped the gossip through the air. Will shoved his way through quite rudely, and when he entered the foyer, Jack looked up sharply and beckoned him over.

The corpse lay out in the open, bared to all and sundry.

It was dressed in a rich gown of navy and green, with lavish trimmings of teal velvet at the hems. The slippers on its feet were sweetly embroidered with little flowers. The hands were white and clean underneath its fine opera gloves, and a dainty purse was still loosely held in cold fingers. Chestnut hair lay in a tidy cascade on the marble floor, its ringlets gleaning in the light of the chandelier overhead.

But the face lay open. The nose had been sheared clean off, along with the corpse’s upper lip; the lack revealed a gape into the dark, shy secrets of the face – the red and black interiors of unknown caverns wending their way to the viscera of the mind and mouth. The eyes were pale hazel and open above the wound.

Will shut his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath of purpose:

He drugged her first, before the opera began, and when she started to feel faint he brought her away. No one made a fuss.

The dress had to be clean, later. That was important, so Will stripped her without a blush, carefully laying it all aside. Then, he bound her tightly, arms behind her back and feet locked together, and just as she woke, before she could protest but just as she realised –

He cut her nose off, and blood spattered everywhere as she howled in pain.

He had timed it well. Ramades was singing of the celestial Aïda, calling her *queen of my thoughts, splendour of my life*, and no one heard her shrieks, her begging for mercy, the cries of “No! No!” as he approached again. The sustained high B-flat at the end of the aria

drowned her out with thunderous emotion, and no one heard the sour-note *vibrato* of her pain as he cut off her upper lip as well.

Then he put down the knife, but let his hand linger near it. He drew out a little vial.

He told her, “Drink this, or I’ll cut out your eyes as well.” And he made as if to put down the vial and pick up the knife again.

She was a pretty little thing, pampered by family all her life, her hands and feet softly gloved and shod. Never had she experienced pain on such a scale.

Sobbing, she opened her ruined mouth and let him pour the contents in.

And as they waited in the room, and the stage play went forward, and forward, her feet grew cold. The chill crept up shapely calves, and then up the long white thighs. She did not know something was wrong at first, too focused on the pain in her once-pretty face, and by the time the chill had come far up enough, there was nothing to be done.

Finally the ice reached her heart.

Quickly, then – Will daubed the blood from her face, to best display the wound. Then the dress, put back on with careful, almost tender precision, corset laced tight underneath, and finally the trip out from the dressing rooms to the hallway, to lay the body out where all would see.

Will shook himself back to reality; Jack stood patiently waiting for his report.

“Our killer hated her, Jack. But there was no desire to make the victim uglier than she *had* to be – the dress, the shoes, the cleaned face… It’s *tenderness*. A kind of care. So it’s someone close to her, someone who hates and loves her at the same time, and wants to let the world know.”

“What does the killer want the world to know, Will?” Jack asked, his voice urgent. The whole of London high society encircled the two of them, it seemed. Those ladies who had fainted had already been rushed away, but there were a fair number still, whose gentlemen friends had not escorted them away, whose fascination with the spectacle had kept them here, and they waved their smelling salts and feathered fans as the black-and-white-clothed menfolk tried to hold back their disgust from their expressions. Will swallowed dryly at the press of attention, his mouth dry and his head spinning.

“Why, that she would cut off her own nose to spite her face, of course,” came a low, accented voice behind them.

Will and Jack both turned to see a man, impeccably dressed, topping his evening wear with a sphinx-like quirk of a smile.

“My apologies for intruding, gentlemen. My name is Count Hannibal Lecter.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you're all as thrilled as me to see Hannibal make his appearance.

This week's snatch of poetry:

You, my friend, are somehow lonely, because…
we, with words and gestures,
make the world into our own
perhaps its weakest, most dangerous part.

But who points, with gestures, to a scent?
Yet of those powers, that threaten us,
you feel so many… You know the dead
and you take fright at the speakings of magic.

-- Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus, XVI

Again, I hope you've enjoyed the work so far; if you have, please leave me a comment, kudos, or add a bookmark! If you have any errors to point out or any criticisms to make, please do let me know as well. :) Thank you!

all angels are terrifying

Chapter Summary

> Our main characters draw closer together as Will investigates the girl killed at the Opera House.

Chapter Notes

> I apologise for this being late: I blame the Hannibal Season 3 finale, which threw me into a total tailspin of emotion. I had to write myself some fic to help deal with all my unrequited feelings for Hannibal/Will, which resulted in this fic: Death and Transparency. If you've enjoyed my work thus far, I'd really like it if you checked that out as well! Much love to everyone who's been following this slow, decorously Victorian burn of a fic. I will begin to reply to comments soon, I promise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel
Ordnungen? und gesetzt selbst, es nähme
einer mich plötzlich ans Herz: ich verginge von seinem
stärkeren Dasein. Denn das Schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht,
uns zu zerstören. Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.

"Aebbe the Younger was the Mother Superior of the Coldingham Monastery in Scotland, when the Vikings came," said Hannibal Lecter, subtly turning his body to include the ears which strained towards them from the balcony and their surroundings, although his voice seemed pitched for Jack and Will alone. The silent body lay at the edge of their awareness.

"Fearing the loss of their honour, Aebbe exhorted her nuns to discourage the pillage of the Vikings by disfiguring themselves, and led by example. Unfortunately, she so disgusted the Vikings that they burned the monastery down, and for that, the wonderful Aebbe was sainted." Hannibal smiled, and inclined his head towards the two of them as though it had been a performance. "And that is where we derive the saying, 'Cutting off one's nose to spite one's face', gentlemen."

Will felt, absurdly, as though he ought to be bursting into applause. Jack was made of stronger stuff, because he bowed his head in brief deference, but lifted his chin again. “So someone cut off her actual nose–”

“– because she’d done it before,” Will interrupted, his mind churning into overdrive as realisation dawned upon him.

But before he could say more, a junior officer ventured up, timidly interrupting the tableau. “Mr Crawford, we have an identification of th’ woman, sir. It’s Lilly Baines, daughter of Mr Adelson Baines, sir.”

Will drew in a breath of dismay at the same moment as Jack. Hannibal Lecter only looked amused.

“The greengrocer?” came a too-loud question from the crowd, and the speaker was quickly shushed. The barest flick of an eye signaled Will that Count Lecter had noticed the gauche remark, but other than that the man paid no note – you might have thought his face carved from grave, considering granite.

Will felt it was a face that could not be imagined any other way. It denied, by its very existence, the immaturity of youth or the indignity of old age, suggesting only that its owner was a man in the very prime of his faculties, in an age where intelligence and physical vitality came to a harmonious concord with experience. It was rare to find such features in society – more often than not, men wore the gross record of their lives on their faces, and suggested, in their collapsed veins, careworn eyes and hanging jowls, the face that awaited their later years.

Such a man was Adelson Baines, who was often caricatured in the penny papers with a face that had once been hatchet but now was merely hanging, though the man remained as vicious in his dealings with others as ever. He was indeed a greengrocer, though only the rarified, elevated crowd that thronged the opera room would dare term him as such. A merchant who had made vast fortunes from commerce, he had built his fame primarily on the import of exotic foodstuffs, and now moved in circles which bowed and swayed at his feet, shaken like trees before a great and wealthy wind.

The leaded glass windows of his stores bore his name in elaborately scrolled font, and the scripted letters kept watch over towering displays of fruit and food: rich treasure of all kinds – oranges and lemons piled high in pyramids of loot with spiky pine-apples playing sentry at the base, while from the elaborate trellises that his store employees carefully built hung Bacchic bunches of deep crimson and purple grapes, and boxes and boxes of ripe, plump, jewel-like figs, interweaved with displays of walnuts still nestled coyly in their shells. In a different neighbourhood the *pièce de résistance* might be the great turkeys of the Norfolk strain, and the chickens from Bresse, noted for the tenderness of their flesh when roasted, inviting rich women to order them for their homes and dinner tables. And there were always the smaller grocers in cheaper locales, for Adelson Baines was no snob, and would happily selled tinned fat and meat to the housewife looking to add a touch of flavour to the potatoes she fed her hardworking husband.

And there his daughter lay brutally killed on the floor.

“She had a friend,” said Will, his mind working desperately. He found he could hardly draw his eyes away from Count Lecter, whose gaze was fixed on Will. It was strangely shameless – few people looked so directly and so unrelentingly at Will, and he did not know whether to find it exhilarating or disconcerting. “Whom she hurt – perhaps in order to protect that friend? Or perhaps to hurt someone else.”

Or maybe both,” Count Lecter allowed, taking a step closer to Will. Will took a step closer as well, but he glanced down, breaking the intimacy of their locked eyes. “We do strange things for strange reasons.”

“Sometimes those reasons are good reasons,” Will murmured, closing his eyes for a faint second. Unbidden, the scene rose again before his eyes, and he felt the hot rush of *vindication* and *rightness* as he drew the blade down and took the nose clean off. He had not expected it to be so simple, so easy to cut through flesh and bone. The knife was sharp, sharper than he had anticipated.

“What is a good reason?” inquired Count Lecter.

“To vindicate herself,” Will said, half to himself. Yes, it would be a woman, of course it would be a woman. This was a woman’s attention to details of dress, a woman’s careful poisoning at the end. It would be a young woman, to be a friend of Lilly Baines. It would be a young woman who would previously have been deferential to Lilly, who was rich and clever and pretty, until the betrayal and the horror and the vows of revenge. “To clear herself of the accusation that Lilly Baines must have made,” Will said, his voice rising in a question at the end of his sentence, though he was so sure, now, so certain…

“And what accusations can one young woman make of another?” Count Lecter asked, and Will looked back up at him. His eyes were very amber, almost red in the golden glow of the chandelier, which glittered down on the strangest tableau ever to be presented in the Opera House. They were close enough now to be engaged in a private conversation, a tête-à-tête in a private drawing room of some house, rather than in the foyer of a public venue.

“Many accusations,” Will said guardedly, suddenly unwilling to give away what felt like too much of himself.

There was a long pause, and then Count Lecter smiled at him. With that, the spell was, if not entirely broken, a little disrupted. The sound of constables dispersing the crowd and laying a white cloth over the body filtered back into Will’s dizzy awareness, although the count held the large part of it still. “I am sure you will discover what acusations have been made, in time. You are very astute, Mr…?”

“William Graham,” Will said. “Miss Alana Bloom has mentioned you to me,” he suddenly said, then flushed again at the faint uptick of a pleased eyebrow.

“Miss Bloom is known to me, yes. She is a woman of great straightforwardness and talent, and I am humbled to count myself amongst her acquaintances. But how did you encounter her?”

“At the British Museum – the library.”

“Ah, that explains it. A reader as well, then, besides your… more unusual talents.”

Will suppressed a flinch. “No more talented or well read than you,” he pointed out defensively. “I doubt many of *your* acquaintances know the old histories of Scottish monasteries.”

“It *is* an esoteric interest,” Counter Lecter allowed. “But one I enjoy.”

Will flushed. “I have to go,” he said abruptly, gesturing at the body in vague explanation.

“Of course. I will retire for the evening, and leave the Yard’s finest to their efforts. But Mr Graham – please do call one evening when you have the time. I would love to hear more about this case.”

“The penny papers will get a hold of this sooner or later. You can read them for that,” Will said, retreating behind a shell of bluntness, flirting with the very edge of rude. “To see if your hunches are correct, Count Lecter.”

The other man seemed to take no offense. “Well, if so, come call nonetheless. I would also love to speak more with you, Mr Graham. Let me leave you my address –”

“Miss Bloom has given it to me already.”

“Well, then. Miss Bloom seems to think highly of you… and you have a truly singular mind, if I may make so free as to say so.”

“We’ll see,” Will said uncomfortably, and turned away to talk to Jack. He felt oddly hot under the collar, which was vaguely reminiscent of how he had felt at dinner with Miss Bloom, but that seemed so far away now. And when he turned back, Hannibal Lecter had disappeared back into the crowd, but Will still felt his presence and his words, lingering at the nape of Will’s neck.

When they called upon the Baines household, they were ushered into a parlour which was the very height of opulence by a butler who seemed horrendously affronted by the idea of a black man and an American. It set Jack on edge immediately, and Will fidgeted a little, clearly discomfited by their surroundings.

A little greenfinch was set in an elaborately curliqued cage by the window, and it glanced disinterestedly at their direction as they came in and perched awkwardly on richly brocaded seats. The whole room was a profuse disarray of clashing colour and fabric, and the chair was so overstuffed as to be suffocatingly uncomfortable.

When Mrs Baines swept into the room, she too was excessively upholstered, with a triple chin and volumes of flesh covered in swathes of black velvet. She wore a dramatic black lace mantilla with her mourning costume, and her face was well made-up. Jack noted dispassionately that there were no traces of tears underneath.

Nonetheless, the minute she sat down on the settee opposite the two of them she launched into voluble lamentations.

“It’s truly awful, truly awful,” she moaned, dabbing frantically at her eyes with a little lawn handkerchief (white, bordered in black, of course). “I cannot *possibly* believe that someone would do that to my Lilly! And she was so beautiful, too – why, the Lord of S— had made an offer for her, for his second son, and she would have been such a grand lady, it would have been truly wonderful– ”

Jack hastened to offer condolences, but she did not even look at him, pretending not to see him and choosing instead to send her next remarks in Will’s direction. Jack felt his instant dislike of her intensifying. “And the Earl of N— cut in on her twice at the last *cotillion*, and I do believe that he would have sent her flowers the next week! Oh, my darling Lilly…” and there she burst into loud, affected sobbing.

“Please accept our condolences,” Will said flatly, with as little intonation as he could muster.

“My colleague and I are investigating the murder,” Jack said firmly, and she turned to look at him with great reluctance. “Do tell us whether Miss Lilly had any close female friends her age.”

“Well, my Lilly was friends with the best kind,” Mrs Baines said tremulously, but was interrupted in her reminisces by the entrance of Mr Baines.

The contrast between him and his wife could not have been more startling – the battle-axe face that had so often been satirised and pointed out by the London press had collapsed into a mess. The very features seemed blurred by grief, the skin blotched white and red by horror and sorrow. He still carried himself very straight, but it seemed as though that were by tremendous force of will alone, pulling him upright as though with a sword in the point of his back. He walked like a man who had been dealt a mortal wound, and now had to move carefully, lest he bleed out before he could finish speaking.

Jack got quickly to his feet, followed slowly by Will. He felt motivated not so much by social deference as by a vague feeling that it would be disrespectful to remain seated in the face of such immense sorrow, but the tableau was ruined by Mrs Baines, who flung herself at her husband, shrieking her sorrows to the rafters of their stately home. To his credit, Mr Baines caught her and eased her gently back down to the sofa, upon which he turned to Jack and Will and said, in a steady monotone, “Officers.” He kept a hand on his wife’s back, absent-mindedly stroking and patting alternately.

“Mr Baines,” Jack said, sensing that here, at least, was someone who would answer questions without meaningless patter. “We were just asking your wife if your daughter had any close female friends.”

“And if you know if she had a quarrel with any of them recently,” Will interjected.

Mrs Baines launched back into a long list of the titled young women whom Lilly Baines had apparently constantly taken tea with, but Mr Baines patted her hand to stop her and firmly

answered, “Well, there’s Philomena and Rose and Nellie. Those are the girls she is particularly close to.”

Will did not comment on the use of the present tense. “Their full names, please?”

“Philomena Smith, Rose Ewing, and Eleanor Bachmeier.”

“And you say your daughter was close to these three in particular?”

“Yes,” Mr Baines said. “Especially Rose. Rose is her cousin, and they’ve grown closer ever since Rose’s mother – my sister, you know – died last year, of the consumption.”

“The other two?”

“Eleanor is visiting from Germany for the Season, and staying at her aunt’s in upper Brook Street. They were at finishing school together. Philomena is the daughter of an old friend of mine,” Mr Baines answered. “Duncan Smith is her father – the biscuit manufacturer, you may have heard of him?”

“No one’s heard of *him*,” Mrs Baines said dismissively.

A chilly silence descended.

“Thank you,” Jack said uncomfortably, closing his notebook. “We’ll be in touch if– ”

But he never got to finish his sentence, for at that moment the little greenfinch began to sing, a cheerful, sweet chirping that filled the stuffy air of the room with loud gaiety. Mrs Baines burst into fresh tears: “Oh, my Lilly! She loved that bird!”

Adelson Baines got to his feet, and with swift strides he crossed the room.

He reached for the latch of the cage.

Suddenly uneasy, Jack got quickly to his feet, but Mr Baines had already closed one large, steady hand about the bird. Its song turned to cries of distress, which grew shriller and sharper as the pressure closed in about it. Mr Baines’s calm expression did not change. Even as Jack shouted in dismay and started for him with arms outstretched, he squeezed harder, and harder, and suddenly was holding a fistful of ruptured flesh and bone. A spatter hit the curliqued cage, and a spatter hit the damask tablecloth, and a spatter hit the richly carpeted floor.

Mr Baines expression did not change, but Mrs Baines started screaming –

But only until her husband dropped the feathers-and-blood onto the spattered damask tablecloth, and turned to face her, still wearing that expression – at which she fainted dead away.

Thus thwarted, he turned to the two of them, and his expression was still placid, his eyes still sad and grave. When he spoke his voice was courteous. “Thank you, gentlemen. I trust you will see yourselves out.”

Will was standing there too, arms tight with corded muscle, fists clenched and eyes blazing with hatred.

Jack grabbed him by the shoulder and physically wrenched him from the room.

Later that evening, as he sat by the fire and watched Bella darn his socks, he would not tell her what was wrong. But if someone had known what question to ask, he would have said that he did not know what had unnerved him more – the chill in Adelson Baines's face, or the fury in Will's.

The next day was a Sunday, and so there was no opportunity to chase after the three girls who had been named. Will slept uneasily, woke early, and lay still in bed even when he awoke, his mind straying idly the minute he opened his eyes to the sunshine.

The light of the growing London summer fell across the stray details of his bare-bones room: the floorboards, well-swept; the ceiling, unevenly warped by time. The little ants – marching their way with such gentle purpose along the windowsill that Will wished for a moment that his strange talent for seeing extended to animals, that he would be able to launch himself into their mind and borrow some of their serenity.

But then again, perhaps an ant's mind was as much a whirl of confusion as a person's. Perhaps they lived in fear of sudden-descending death as much as humanity did. Perhaps they too judged each other different, even as Will though them all uniform. Perhaps they held balls, and presented young lady ants to their Queen, just as London Town did.

Young debutantes like white ants… all made in the same image of girlhood flowering as they bowed in a straight line, and all the while behind their chaste faces and hemlines secret jealousies and resentments and hatreds boiled. They boiled hard enough to overflow their vessel and shed blood on an opera theatre floor…

Will had seen a photograph of Lilly Baines. She had been a pretty girl, with even features and a lopsided-smile.

In his mind's eye he saw her and her three companions, and Lilly was the queen ant this time, her face perched atop a bulbous body, which pulsed, faintly, as she drew her friends in and they laughed together in a garden, no one making even the slightest comment about Lilly's segmented limbs… then the next thing they were doing was dancing on a ballroom floor with black marble veined in white, and Lilly's body was slender and girlish but her face was opening, pouring out ants and drawing them in, the hundreds, the thousands, the millions of them, and the dancers were stepping on the bodies of those ants as they rushed to and fro to Lilly…

Somewhere on this dance floor was Abigail, Will realised – Abigail was doing her fair share of the dancing as well, but Will was locked in Lilly's embrace, whirling quicker and quicker across the marble as the ants swirled and died around them.

“May I cut in,” said a cultured, genteel voice, and Will looked up into the warm, fathomless eyes of Hannibal Lecter, who offered *him* a six-fingered hand.

Will startled awake, gasping, and as if on cue, Miss Beverly Katz shouted, “Mr Graham! Are you up? There’s a telegram for you!”

Alana sighed.

She was thinking of the work that remained to be done at home – her sister’s school essays needed correcting, and the Dublin Quarterly Journal had had a fascinating article on incision techniques that she had particularly wanted to read.

And, yet, here she was at The Society for The Improvement of Public Morals.

As if prompted by her dissatisfied thoughts, her companion turned to her, an abject little smile on her face. “I am so grateful that you came with me, Alana.”

“It’s no problem at all, Rose,” Alana reassured her. At worst, she could while away the hour by reciting the bones of the body. And of course there was always the improbable chance that the lecture would be actually interesting, though Alana doubted it. Rose’s preferred lectures were hardly ever interesting, but she had seized on to Alana early in their acquaintanceship, and her hangdog little manner never failed to inspire some sympathy in Alana.

The room was beginning to fill up – they had got there a little early and got a good seat right at the edge of the long central aisle, and were well in the middle, with a good view of the pulpit – the lectern, Alana mentally corrected herself. Rose busied herself by greeting some of the women who were venturing in; for her own part, Alana was content to remain a seated observer. Idly, she noted the faint redness of mild psoriasis in a man of about fifty, three rows back, and wondered about the link between psoriasis and arthritis, which had been posited before. She also noticed that people took care to sit further away from him, and felt a stab of irritation at the folly of the common people, who were always crammed full of strange superstitions. But it would go amiss if she got up and shouted, “It’s not contagious!” and it would embarrass the poor man besides.

Rose tremulously greeted a woman with, “Mrs Beeching, it is so good to see you,” and was almost blown back into her seat by the stentorian roar of “GOOD TO SEE YOU TOO, CHILD. AND HOW IS YOUR FATHER?” Approaching deafness, Alana ruled.

A tall slender woman could not hide the redness of her alcoholic nose with powder, although she was making a valiant attempt to. A man who walked with a terrible limp but an upright bearing suggested the Crimean, but the man who came in after him had a similar inability to walk – yet was covered in folds of bulging flesh and had specks of what looked like cheese gravy speckled on his shirt. Gout, then. A pale young woman was so obviously consumptive that Alana felt a flare of concern for her; she ought to be in a sanatorium, not in a dirty lecture hall surrounded by people, weak as she was.

Rose's multitudes of bowings and scrapings had not stopped; Alana nodded when she heard her name and smiled mechanically, but otherwise wanted very little to do with the women who Did Good Works. She was saying something perfunctory and polite to one of the women when someone caught her eye –

Mr Will Graham, her mind supplied, of the British Museum – or rather, of Scotland Yard.

She smiled at him and made a discreet little wave of her hand; his eyes widened as he saw her, and he nodded in her direction. But he made no move to come any closer, instead taking a seat at the very back, and she made no move to motion him closer. *He* didn't have to be subject to all this at close quarters.

Well, Alana, reflected, settling back into her seat, he didn't have to be subject to all this at all. So what was he doing here? Their last conversation had given her the distinct impression that even if Mr Graham was not quite a secularist, he certainly was no ardent believer, keen on giving up his Sunday rest to listen to a female preacher speaking of fire and brimstone and the "public works that we should all be engaging in". There was nobody with him, so he could not be doing the duty of an unenthusiastic friend, as she was.

Intrigued, Alana determined that they should speak together later, after the lecture had concluded.

Greetings done, Rose subsided back into the seat next to Alana. She pulled out, primly, a neat little notebook bound handsomely in green morocco leather. Alana thought it was rather a pity that such a charming volume should contain such useless scribblings, but the minute the thought was formed she chided herself firmly for having it. That was unfair of her, and besides, these little lectures gave Rose pleasure. They helped her feel that she was learning something, and Alana could relate to that. The thrill of discovery, of figuring something out, of feeling as though one had industriously made an effort at work and produced something worthwhile – those were good feelings.

And Rose had been determined to stay cheerful and occupied even after her mother had died last year, and for that Alana could admire that flash of spirit, if nothing else.

Thus chastened, Alana settled down to an evening of paying attention. The susurration of the audience settled down into a low murmur as the clock ticked on, and Rose leaned over and whispered, "I'm so excited, Alana. Mrs Lane is supposed to be an excellent speaker."

"I'm sure it will be splendid, Rose."

"Today's lecture is on The Condition of the People," Rose proclaimed, writing it down in the notebook and underlining the title with palpable satisfaction.

The *Conditions* of the People, Alana thought rather cynically, included syphilis, diphtheria, poliomyelitis, whooping cough, cholera and quack medicine.

"It pains me to think of all those people living in sin," Rose said ponderously, but Alana was saved from having to make a reply by the appearance of Mrs Wilhelmina Lane, dressed in a neat black straw bonnet and a good dress of gray silk.

Her voice, at least, was pleasing, Alana noted. It had a good timbre and carried well in the hall. But any woman who began her speech by reminding the gathered men and women that she stood before them to speak only to affirm the idea that God "hath chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world to shame the strong"…

Well. Alana turned to a recital of the bones, beginning with the occipital.

When the lecture was done, she clapped politely, although the applause was ringing strong and loud around her. It had been a good sermon by most people's lights; urging people to consider the easy nature of evil, and how the Devil stood ready to lead even the most virtuous into ready temptation. And Alana disagreed with none of this, in principle. It was simply that she found their definitions of "ready temptation" troubling in their imprecision. But Rose's eyes were shining, so Alana smiled and agreed with her friend and complimented the righteousness of Mrs Lane's preaching, and her bravery in taking the stand when she was merely a woman.

"Miss Bloom."

She did not have to turn around to know who it was. "Mr Graham," she said, and was a little mortified to realise that her voice came out a little archer than she would have usually used on any other man. "Fancy meeting you here."

He bowed lightly to her. He was, she noted, looking quite handsome tonight, which his face clean-shaven and his dark curls tumbling around his face and his sharp blue eyes – but his next words sent all thoughts of that out of her head. "It's unfortunate, but I was actually looking to speak to your companion. Miss Rose Ewing?"

Rose made a little squeak of discomfort. “Me?”

“Yes. I understand you knew Miss Lilly Baines?”

“Cousin Lilly? Why yes,” Rose answered. “What – I don’t – has something happened?” she asked tremulously, realisation finally dawning in her eyes.

“Yes,” he said flatly. “I’m afraid Ms Baines is no longer with us.”

Rose gave a little shriek and fainted dead away.

Alana slanted an annoyed look at Will, getting to her knees to try and help Rose. “You could have told her that a little more gently, Mr Graham.”

“Believe me, Miss Bloom,” he said gravely, “That was as kind as I could be.”

“Is it as bad as all that?” she asked. “Is there a room I can take her to?” she asked the secretary of the Society, who had come over to help, hands a-flutter. “And some sal volatile, if you have it, and water for her to drink when she wakes.” Brandy would have helped even more, Alana felt, but Rose would not have appreciated her asking for brandy when the lecture

had been so clear on the topic of temperance. “Help me carry her, Mr Graham,” Alana directed.

He hefted Rose into his arms carefully and easily, and their odd little party of three followed the secretary down the hallway to a bare little office room which had a desk, chairs and a couch.

“Will you leave, Mr Graham?” Alana asked. “I need to loosen her corset.”

He blushed – which went some way towards soothing her ruffled opinion of him – but shook his head – which did not. “I need to speak to Miss Ewing.”

“She has had a terrible shock.”

“I shall be blunt with you, Miss Bloom. Her cousin has been brutally murdered.”

“What?!” Alana said, shocked. “But there was no mention of it in the papers…”

“Mr Adelson Baines is trying his best to keep his daughter’s good name out of the gutter press,” Will answered. What was left of it, anyway, he did not add. “I need to speak to Miss Ewing.”

“I – I understand,” Alana said, pale. “Well, give me your coat and go stand outside the door, and I will tell you when she is fit to be spoken to.”

Will went and stood outside the door – the secretary went twittering past him, carrying the bottle of smelling salts and some water and a cloth. The soft murmurings of female voices rose and fell, and then there was a distinct cry of “Oh!”, and then, Miss Bloom’s clear, high tenor: “Don’t you faint again, Rosie!”

Then a brief storm of sobbing, and then Miss Bloom appeared at the doorway. “You may come in and speak with her now, Mr Graham. Please refrain from agitating her too much.”

“In your capacity as a doctor, Miss Bloom?” Will asked.

Alana grimaced. “Yes, in my capacity as a doctor.” She let him in and marched back to Rose, taking her by the hand. “Rose, this is Mr Graham of Scotland Yard. I know him, and you needn’t be afraid.”

“My condolences, Miss Rose,” Will began. “I understand you and your cousin were close?”

Fresh tears welled up in Rose’s eyes. She was half-reclined on the couch, wearing his coat thrown backwards around her to preserve her modesty, and she clung tight to Alana’s hand, as though it were a lifeline. “Not really, Mr Graham. She was always so busy with her own friends. But she was kind to me when my mother died. She said – oh, she said that it was a pity that it was mine who had died, and not hers. And I told her it was wicked to say so, but – but she was *right*, really, and – and – it was kind of her to say so–”

Rose burst out into loud sobs again. Alana patted her hand gently and gave it a squeeze.

“Did you know who she was close with, then?”

“Well, there was the girl from Germany. I had tea with them, once.”

Something strange signal in her face must have prompted Will Graham’s next question, because Alana had seen nothing. “You didn’t like this girl much, Miss Ewing. Why?”

“Well, it’s not that I didn’t like her,” Rose said defensively. “She didn’t like me. And to be honest with you I got the feeling that she didn’t like Lilly all that much either!” In her indignation on behalf on her cousin she became quite voluble, forgetting the sorrow of her cousin’s death. “I don’t see why not. Lilly was lovely to her and took her around to all the best places, and she was awfully rude.”

“I see…?”

“Lilly can be hard to get along with, I know that,” Rose continued angrily. “But she’s nice. She does things for people and doesn’t mind even when they don’t deserve it or they’re not grateful.”

“Alright, Miss Ewing. Is there anyone else you can think of, who was close to your cousin?”

Fresh tears welled up at Will’s use of the past tense. “Well, there were lots of other girls. Lilly was popular.”

Privately, Alana agreed with this. She had not been particularly taken with Miss Baines, but there was truth to the idea that she drew people in, with vivacity and money and careless good looks. Alana had been too bookish for Lilly Baines’s taste, but they had been cordial enough to each other. Lilly Baines had friends aplenty – but mousy little Rose hadn’t been part of Lilly’s inner circle, and that soon became apparent enough for Will.

“Thank you for your time,” Will finally said, and he left, with apologetic looks in both their directions.

When the door of the dingy little office room shut behind him, Rose, who had been trying to keep a brave face up, crumpled against Alana’s shoulder, sobbing deeply.

“Oh Rose, don’t cry,” Alana soothed frantically. “I’m sure Lilly wouldn’t want to see you cry.”

“I – I know that,” Rose said, gulping back her tears without much success. “But it’s just – so awful to think about it, Alana!”

“It will be alright,” Alana murmured. “I’m sure she’s in a better place now.” The platitudes sat uneasy on her tongue, but it was clearly what Rose needed to hear. They sat in silence for a while, Alana stroking her back lightly, waiting for the tears to stop.

“If only I could just speak to Lilly – and Mother – for one last time,” Rose said sadly, hiccupping.

Then inspiration struck Alana. Next week – Hannibal's invitation! "Listen – I know. We'll go to a séance together. I've been asked to one, Rosie. You've always wanted to go to one, haven't you?"

She resolved to explain the situation to Hannibal. The invitation had been for one alone, but she felt she could presume that far upon his good graces.

"Could we really?" Rose asked, lifting a tear-stained face.

"Yes, of course," Alana said firmly. "Here, have my handkerchief."

Rose took the clean square of linen gratefully and blew her nose. "Yes, we could talk to Lilly – and Mother too, of course."

Internally Alana groaned. She had very little truck with such ideas, but Rose was deeply fascinated by any idea of life after death and the ability to speak again to those who had "gone beyond the veil", as she liked to term it. This was not the first time that she had spoken of such things. "We can try," Alana said. "It may not make much sense."

"We have to try," Rose said, and her face was determined now, despite the reddened eyes and nose.

"Alright," Alana said, a sense of foreboding settling inside her.

The Savoy was, as always, impeccable.

As was Count Lecter, who rose from his seat on the earth-red armchair of the anteroom and offered her his arm. There was, in defiance of the current preference for severity, the faintest of paisley patterns to his coattails - the merest effect of black on black - but it would have been unthinkable to chastise him for it.

Alana herself had tried to dress in perfect proper style, in blue and white silks with her corset laced as tight as was plausible, cords of lapis lazuli and mother of pearl wound gently about her neck and wrists. To do any less would have been indecorous.

She smiled as she took his arm. "You look very well, Count Lecter. As you always do, of course."

The small talk carried them across the great room with its tremendous mahogany panels, with its golden friezes and its gold-and-red ceiling, the sombre wood setting off the red drapes to great effect. They were greeted and seated by a waiter in a white apron so clean that Alana could have used it in surgeries, and the sommelier with his silver chain stood back to allow Monsieur Bardin to bustle over and pay his homage to the Count. Hannibal Lecter was known to any restaurant which made any kind of claim to renown in London; they trembled at the thought of having him attend their dinner table, both in fear and anticipation. He was known for the quality of his own table, and for his sometimes-indulged fancy of doing the

cooking himself, which was unthinkable in a typical nobleman but merely admirable in the Count.

Personally, Alana rather felt that the thing which was truly admirable was the aplomb with which Lecter navigated the relentless social waters of London and came out serene as a shark on the other side of turbulent waters.

“I have a favour to ask, sir,” Alana said, determined to be straightforward as the waiters brought them pearls of caviar, glistening with their dark gray-green sheen on a slender, clear block of ice, served with mother-of-pearl spoons.

“A difficult favour, I hope,” Hannibal replied, an amused quirk bringing up the left corner of a thin lip. “Anything less than that would not be cordial, between friends.”

“Oh, a tremendously difficult one,” Alana said wryly. “Would you allow me to bring a *friend* to the séance that you invited me to, next week?”

“And what is the difficulty in the favour?”

“The friend,” Alana said succinctly. “Her name is Rose Ewing.”

“Ah.” They were silent for a moment as they ate the caviar, the eggs bursting on their tongue, redolent of the Caspian and its trembling waves. Then Hannibal spoke: “And this friend is dear enough to you that you ask this favour of me?”

He was not fond of the undistinguished and the banal and the uninteresting, Alana knew, and it was nothing more than simple honesty to admit that Rose was all those things. Nonetheless, Alana had promised. “Her mother died last year, and now she has become embroiled in a truly grisly murder. I think a séance might help her come to terms with both these events, and be good for her state of mind.”

“And what of my state of mind?” Hannibal asked teasingly.

Alana tossed a hand lightly in dismissal. “It would be terrible if I had to compare your state of mind to hers.”

He laughed, and the waiters brought them the soup course – a clear consommé of lobster, chilled impeccably and jewel-clear in the lowlights of the dining room. “And you think a séance would be useful to someone bereaved, who has been involved in a grisly murder?”

“It can hardly make things any worse. She has this idea that she may be able to try to speak to the dead, and in doing so gain reassurance. At worst, she will be frightened off such chicanery in future,” Alana said dismissively.

“Such chicanery?” Hannibal asked teasingly.

Alana blushed. “You know my views on such matters.”

“I do indeed, Miss Bloom. Well, you may have your friend – but on the condition that you tell me of this grisly murder. I have an inkling that I may have witnessed it. But only after our

next courses."

Alana laughed and acquiesced, and they permitted the *foie gras* parfait with Madeira jelly to pass in decorous discussion of Alana's continuing struggles with the medical establishment of Harley Street first. Likewise, they accompanied the Savoy's celebrated *cocotte de canard en chemise* with the retelling of Hannibal's pursuit of a rare volume of works rumoured to be penned in John Dee's hand.

Finally, when they were served their slices of beef heart – garnished with English asparagus and new potatoes – lightly grilled and red in the centre, Hannibal smiled. "Now you may tell me of this murder."

Alana cut off a piece of meat and popped it into her mouth with relish first. "It's Lilly Baines – Adelson Baines's daughter. My friend Rose is her cousin. Were you involved?"

"Yes."

"How did she die?" Alana asked, her curiosity getting the better of her. "I was told it was grisly, but not much else."

"The death itself was reasonably peaceful. A toxin for the heart, I would presume, from what I saw–"

"You saw?"

"The corpse was laid out in the foyer of the Opera House."

Alana blanched. "And it was grisly because it had been mutilated in some way," she guessed flatly.

"Your intuitions are correct, as always. You wish to know?"

"Of course I do."

Hannibal smiled. "It might be better for you not to. Be blind, Miss Bloom. That can often be the better choice."

"I would have thought you of all people would know my thoughts on women and enforced blindness," Alana said, low and heated.

"This is not about gender, Miss Bloom. I would give the same advice to a man. But if you insist…"

"I do."

"I shall refrain from resisting, then. It might anger you further. Her nose and upper lip were cut off entirely – you could see into her face."

Alana shuddered hard. "That sounds revolting."

“It is. I fear it may have put you off your dinner.”

“Oh no,” Alana said, laughing, though there was a strained note in her voice. “I am not quite as affected as all that, Count Lecter. But I can see why he did not want to tell Rose that – oh, there’s a policeman, by the name of Will Graham, who is in charge of the case. He came to look for Rose and I happened to be there – she took it very badly, of course.”

“I may have met this Mr Graham at the scene,” Hannibal said. “What did he look like?”

“Not tall, but with very blue eyes and hair that many women would love to have. Not quite handsome, but determined, and striking because of it. He also looks very strained. I suspect his job is bad for him,” Alana said promptly.

“You have observed a great deal for such a short meeting,” Hannibal pointed out. “You have considered the question of whether he is attractive, and in fact, you have settled it in his favour. In your mind, Miss Bloom, to be striking is better than to be handsome.”

Alana determinedly ignored the second half of Hannibal’s insight, although they both knew that she had heard and been struck by it. “It was not a short meeting, not really – or rather, it was not the only meeting. I met him previously, at the British Museum’s Library. He was researching folklore – a strange subject for a policeman, I remember thinking. And I ate dinner with him at the Albion.”

“A decent establishment,” Hannibal allowed. “That does indeed sound like the man I met. I confess, he mentioned that you had told him of me.”

“I did,” Alana said. “You must think me very rude – I find I have made quite free with your name. But you *are* known as a scholar of the strange and occult.”

Hannibal gave the impression of a shrug without moving his shoulders in the least. “I am sure you did not give it lightly. He sounds like an interesting character, Miss Bloom.”

“He is,” Alana acknowledged. “He is outside of the usual run of the mill of my acquaintances – as we are for each other,” she added.

They dropped the topic, and it was not until the mock peaches – styled out of vanilla ices – came to the table that Alana took it up again. “To be honest, Count Lecter – I believe that Mr Graham would be interested in your séance as well. Would it be too much of an imposition to invite him as well?”

Hannibal smiled calmly. “Of course not, Miss Bloom. I look forward to it.”

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal knows *exactly* what he's doing.

This week's snippet of poetry:

If I cried out, who, amongst the orders of the angels,
would hear me? And even if one of them held me,
suddenly, against his heart: I would be consumed
in that powerful existence. For that which is Beauty is nought
but the beginnings of Terror, which we are but just able to endure,
and we awe and wonder at it, for it calmly disdains
to destroy us. Thus every angel is terrifying.

-- Rilke, Duino Elegies, the First

fricassee

Chapter Summary

Will attends a dinner party and a seance, and discovers a great deal about both himself and the enigmatic Count Hannibal Lecter.

Chapter Notes

Please note: this chapter contains graphic content, of a type of violence that may be unpalatable even to those of you who have watched and enjoyed Hannibal with no loss of appetite. I creeped myself out by writing it, in some ways – I have done my best, however, to have our sympathetic characters treat it with the appropriate revulsion and horror and I hope that you will find it plausible and in keeping with the trajectory of this piece of fiction. **Please skip to the note at the end if you wish to be warned or if you wish to skip this chapter in its entirety**.

Some of you may realise that this chapter's quotation moves us away from the Orpheus theme of the previous two chapters – it is a quote that originates from Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. If you are aware of the content of this source text, you will be aware of what comes ahead in this chapter.

Lastly, I apologise for the long absence - there was a series of family and personal crises on my end, and I've been fighting fires all month. I hope to return to our regularly scheduled programming after this, and I beg your forbearance and forgiveness in advance!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I have been assured, by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London... [it] is, at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled, and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasie, or a ragoust.

"I bid you gentlemen good day," said Eleanor Bachmeier, standing up and extending an icy hand.

Will took it and bowed over it, and she swept from the room, the long golden braid of her hair shining atop her head.

That was a wash-out, at least. Miss Bachmeier and Miss Baines had quarreled a few months back over the matter of an essay in their last year of finishing school together, and Miss Bachmeier no longer saw much of her at all. It was not in the least pleasing to know that Lilly had been brutally killed, of course not. She had no alibi but her family for the evening – but what did it matter? *She* certainly hadn't done it.

Will was inclined to agree. What Eleanor Bachmeier felt was a very simple kind of dislike, and a little horror at the fact that murder had come so close to her own life, but her words had been marked by none of the complexity of feeling that Will had experienced, standing over that crime scene in the Opera House.

And despite all that had happened, Will's mind lingered still on what had happened in Epping Forest – and his focus had only been reawakened by an elegant little missive that had been delivered to Scotland Yard. It had read:

Dear Mr Graham,

I would be most pleased if you would do me the honour of escorting my friend Miss Ewing and me to Count Hannibal Lecter's for dinner this Thursday evening. An after-dinner entertainment has been planned, which I believe may be relevant to your interests, if the enticement of my company and Count Lecter's table does not suffice.

Yours,

Alana Bloom

She was astute indeed, to realise that nothing would have induced Will to spend time in the stuffy company of upper-crust London, except the idea that it might be "relevant to his interests", as she so obliquely put it. As it was, Will was dreading the idea of the stiff shirt collar, the boiled cloth, the stifled small talk that made up the conversation, while indecorous undercurrents spun across the table. He had never yet been to such a party, but he rued the evening already. In his mind's eye, he saw himself seated at the table, able to tell, at a glance, who was lying, who was having an affair, who hated her husband, who was only there to gain advantage. He didn't doubt that some would be truly pleased to be seated at such grandiose and irrelevant affairs, and that was, in some ways, worse.

But a suspect would be there, and the charming Miss Bloom, and the enigmatic Count Lecter – and it would be relevant to Epping Forest and what he sought to know about the Fae. That alone would spur Will past reluctance.

Rose took a nervous little bite of her Chantilly cheese and sponge – it was chilled and cool in her mouth, and a familiar taste to boot, which was oddly reassuring. She had been out of her element all dinner, and now was almost entirely exhausted as to what she could possibly say. To avoid having to speak further to her dinner companion, she fixed her eyes on the flowers

in front of her – not a difficult task, considering that the mahogany table almost *groaned* with their weight. She rather thought that one cascade of almost scandalously red-and-yellow blooms were orchids, with the way they splayed their petals open, but that could hardly be right: they were said to cost tremendous amounts of money. Surely they wouldn't be part of the cut centerpieces for a table? There were odd fruits displayed along the table as well – a fruit that was blush-pink, with sharp scales that ended in green tips. And a little green fruit that had distinct spikes protruding from its round surface, peeking from behind an opened pomegranate, spilling its contents like rubies across the silver salver it sat on.

Alana was in her element, of course. Rose tried not to think uncharitable thoughts, either about others or herself, but she had thought she had looked so well in her own dusty green gown – until Alana had arrived in red and white, with scandalously clean-cut lines to her frock, and then Rose felt like everything was too much, there were too many ribbons on her dress, and it was too late to do anything but to take Alana's hand and set out together. Alana always looked charming, and she carried herself that way too. Rose rather envied her: she didn't care if others whispered that she was unmarriageable. Why should she, too, when Count Lecter paid her such obvious attentions? They were seated far enough – Count Lecter was at the head of the table, whereas Alana was rather halfway down, sandwiched between a tremendously large and formidable dowager, and a very handsome man from Cambridge (perhaps a relation of the Count's?) Rose wanted Alana's composure and self-possession. She didn't have it.

Well, she thought resignedly, at least she wasn't the only person in the room to be uncomfortable. Out of a table of twelve, Rose had had the bad fortune of being escorted in to dinner by that horrid policeman who had asked her the questions the last time – although, she scrupulously corrected herself, he had been very nice to her all evening. Perhaps he felt guilty.

It did not surprise her that he was there – he was investigating Cousin Lilly's death, Alana had pointed out – but it did surprise her that he was so gauche. He seemed older than her by far, but he had no idea of the niceties of table, and was taciturn almost to a fault. Rose had tried hard to engage him in conversation – first about his native lands (that American accent was terribly fascinating) and then about her own works, but each time she had been met with significant rebuff. When the French lemon pie (meringues as light and fluffy as air) had been served, she had given up, to both their reliefs, she imagined.

The finger-bowls were brought, they all duly adjourned to the dining room for tea and coffee, and then once everyone was comfortably ensconced around the room, the Count stood up.

"I hope you've enjoyed yourselves tonight."His words were followed by a little cascade of applause. "There is one guest tonight who is particularly distinguished, and you have all gathered here today because I know that you are curious about what lies beyond. Her name is Madame Dimoupoulos."

The matronly lady at his side rose and made a gracious little curtsey to the table. Rose eyed her with great curiosity. She had great flaming masses of red hair, which were her one striking feature – in comparison to that, the rest of her seemed rather plain. Around her neck she wore a cameo necklace with a thin braid of gray hair serving at its chain, and she was

positively draped in black lace. All in all, Rose thought, she looked like quite a satisfactory medium.

"I am given to understand that some amongst you seek guidance from the world beyond us," she said softly. "Who wishes to speak to those gone before us?"

Alana looked at her, so Rose summoned up her courage, and said, "I would like to speak to my mother and cousin, please."

Dinner had been a study in social agony to Will.

The only benefit he could see thus far was that he felt he could safely cross Ewing off the list of suspects. She had conveniently told him all about a paper on the safety of young flower girls that she had read out to her society meeting on the very same evening that Lilly Baines had been killed. He would ask the Yard to check the alibi, of course, but his instincts told him that it made very little sense for such a mouse of a girl to have concocted some kind of elaborate plot.

Another of the ladies at table – a rather formidable, portly looking dowager – had asked him if he had not found the food to his fancy, since he ate so little of it. Will demurred: it was not that it was not delicious – it was simply that he was not in the habit of indulging his tastebuds. Even someone as boorish as he was could clearly tell that Count Lecter kept an excellent table. But as course after exotic course had been served, Will had become more and more anxious for the evening to move on to its second portion.

And finally it had.

It was not in the least promising. Miss Mouse had asked the so-called psychic Madame Dimoupoulos (a pseudonym, or Will would eat his horse) to contact her mother and cousin, and a sympathetic whisper had gone round the Count's heavy mahogany table. London's gossips had not been idle about the fate of Miss Lilly Baines. Adelson Baines's money had weight with the press, perhaps, but not with the wagging tongues of aristocratic London. Will struggled to hold his disgust in check as some of the faces at table sharpened with ghoulish pleasure at the thought of contacting the murdered young girl.

"I shall need five people to form the points of the pentagram with me," Madame Dimoupoulos was saying, when Will returned his attention to her. The servants were obligingly bringing in a little table and chairs from some other room in the Count's palatial house. "You of course, my dear–" this to Miss Ewing – "And yes, of course, Count Lecter." Her gaze went around the room, and settled on the portly dowager from dinner – Mrs Kurhatt, Will now recalled, and then her brown eyes circled the space again, and settled on Will.

"I would not be a suitable candidate, surely," Will demurred, casting about for some excuse.

"Come now, Mr Graham," the Count said silkily. His eyes were amber and maroon in the firelight. "Surely you will not deny us the pleasure of holding your hand?" he asked, and his

smile was so subtly ironic that Will drew up short, forcing himself to focus as the hair on the nape of his neck prickled. But no, there was nothing here, no danger, only Count Lecter in his subtly fashion-forward clothes, looking at Will with faint curiosity in his eyes.

Will took his place in the circle, pointedly choosing not to sit next to the Count. He found himself sandwiched between Ewing and Madame Dimoupoulos herself. The former favoured him with a tremulous little smile, as if to say, *how brave! you and I both,* and Will gave her a meaningless little nod.

The servants dimmed the lights, and then the medium began.

"Take the hands of the persons next to you," Madame Dimoupoulos instructed. "Take a deep breath. Breathe deeply, and let your disbelief leave your body. Disbelief has no place in this circle.

"Breathe in. Breathe in and imagine that time itself is streaming around you – caressing your skin. Cast aside your fear. Fear has no place in this circle.

Will breathed, and watched the circle. Mrs Kurhatt had closed her eyes and was breathing in a most stentorian manner. Little Rose Ewing trembled beside him. Count Lecter's eyes were cool and open, and politely fixed on some point just beyond the Madame's head – Will rather fancied he was making eye contact with the mantelpiece. And beyond the circle stood Alana Bloom, watching him. Will met her gaze, and then she dropped it away.

Was that a blush he saw on her cheeks? Or perhaps just the flickering of the firelight.

"Breathe in. Breathe in and open your minds to space and time itself. Cast aside your secrets. Secrets have no place in this circle – *not even the secrets of the dead*." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I call now to the dead – to the newly departed. If you are here, spirits, speak!"

Then she screamed – a high-pitched sound which died away to a little gurgle in the back of her throat. Ewing and Mrs Kurhatt shrieked and Ewing's grip tightened on Will's hands, but even as the women around him trembled and gasped theatrically, Will sat transfixed – just beyond, standing in the doorway of the room, was a little girl. She could not be any older than three or four, and her mouth was open and she was saying something over and over, her mouth forming the same shapes again and again, but Will could not hear.

Madame Dimoupoulos shrieked again, and gripped Will's hand until the cords in her arms stood out, and drummed her heels against the floor. Will fought her grasp – he wanted to go to her, to the little girl just out there in the corridor, dressed in her white nightie – but he had no power in his arms and legs, which lay heavy as brickwork upon him.

"I speak for the dead," Madame Dimoupoulos muttered, her voice almost too fast to catch, the cadences of her words altered, the pitch high and eerie. "Quick! The dead cannot stay long. Speak! Speak, I beg you!"

He could only watch as tears formed in her eyes, as she struggled against some invisible bonds. She shook her head, and she shook all over with fear, and her hair lifted – *as though some unseen hand had grasped it.*

“Is that you, Lilly?” Ewing asked tremulously, but her voice was so far away, so far away. All Will’s attention was fixed on that little girl, and he could read her lips now, because all they said was a single word – *NO*

NO NO NO NO NO

Will struggled, but it seemed more and more like his body was no longer his to move, even as she was dragged powerlessly away. He watched in vain as she struggled in vain, and then just as abruptly as the apparition had begun, she vanished.

Some light and lightness returned to Will, and he sat, shaking and stunned, as the Madame said, portentously, “You cousin Lilly says that you are to look in something – I am losing her, there is too much interference in the spirit world tonight – it starts with a “b”, is it “book”, my dear Lilly, please tell us, yes, or no?”

A sharp noise like a crack of thunder split the air and Rose Ewing gasped obligingly, but Will sat insensate. “Is that a yes? Do it again!” Madame Dimoupoulos cried – and again the thunderous sound.

Fat Mrs Kurhatt said anxiously, “She must have written something down somewhere!”

The prattle took up space and attention, and Will was grateful, because it meant that people were less likely to pay attention to his heaving breaths, the paleness of his face, the sweat on his brow, his struggle with himself as he kept his eyes locked on the space where he had seen that little girl, both hoping and fearing to see her again –

Except that when he looked away from it, the heavy amber eyes of Count Lecter rested steadily upon him once more. Will swallowed dryly and tried to look back, to meet that gaze with defiance, but then:

There was a high, thin terrified scream. Will looked at Madame Dimoupoulos, but no, it was not her – he turned frantically, but no, it was none of the women in the room –

Then there was a strange sizzling sound, which crackled to life just by his ear – so much so that Will whipped his head around in search of it –

And then a gloriously *delicious* smell filled his nose.

“You’re awake.”

Will reeled himself viciously back to full consciousness, winching himself upwards through dark water and horror to feel soft sheets and a warm coverlet spread over him, draped heavy and comforting. For once he woke cool and clean; rather than drenched in night sweats – this, and the soft cotton pajamas that he wore, told him *You are not at home.* A dull throbbing on the back of his head made itself known.

“What happened?” he croaked.

“You fainted,” came the accented voice, and all things came back to Will in a frantic rush. “Miss Bloom was most concerned about you, as was I.”

Will struggled to sit upright, wincing. “I apologise for the trouble, Count Lecter.”

“No, it was remiss of me, not to notice that you were discomfited.”

“But you *did* notice,” Will said without thinking, too exhausted to remember socially acceptable lies, remembering distinctly that their eyes had met and held across the little table.

The accusation fell heavy between them, and then Hannibal sighed. “Yes, I did. But I will not be remiss in my duties now – let me fetch you something nourishing, and then we may talk.”

He got to his feet and left the room with an oddly silent grace for a man of his height and weight. Will sank back against the yielding pillows and closed his eyes in sheer weariness. He must have hit his head as he fainted – that would explain the rhythmic blood-throb pulsing against the thin barrier of skin – but there was no accounting for the *thing which had made him faint*. He could still see her little face now. She had been so young, so small, so helpless…

Will shuddered hard and opened his eyes again, the better to focus on the fleur-de-lis pattern of the wallpaper, and its harmless opulence. He lay on his side, curled like a comma with his eyes seeing nothing, and that was how Hannibal found him when he pushed the door open again.

“Can you sit up?” the other man’s tone was even, exceedingly gentle.

Will nodded faintly and made himself get upright, listlessly reaching behind himself to prop up the pillows. Where had this strength been earlier, when Will had struggled to reach her?

He turned hen Hannibal came closer, and his nose caught the faint scent of something rising from the bowl in Hannibal’s hands. He had it on a silver tray, and when he approached, Will realised it was a sort of white soup, faintly steaming, with strips of vegetables in it.

“This is rice gruel,” Hannibal said. “In the Orient, they call it *jeok*, and they make ti with meat stock and secret herbs, to feed those who are ill.”

“It smells good.” Will took a sip. It was strange and exotic on his tongue, and the grains were so soft that he did not even need to chew them. It was reassuringly warm and smelled cleanly of water. Will took a deep breath and tried to exorcise the scent of *frying* from his nose.

“You saw something, did you not?” Hannibal settled into the chair by Will’s bedside once more. “Before you fainted.”

Will’s mouthful caught in his throat, and when he swallowed, it was not without difficulty. “I did,” he allowed.

“Is it too horrible to speak of?” Hannibal asked, and the plainness of the question undid Will. He trembled, and set the spoon down with a faint rattle of silver against china, to fist his

hands in the sheets and will himself back to composure. He breathed steadily, small and wounded, and Hannibal did not move ot offer touch or unwanted, comforting banalities.

“It was a child,” Hannibal said gravely, and Will looked up at him in mute shock. *How did you know*, Will Wanted to say. *Do you see them too?*

“I suspect a man like you would hardly be so appalled otherwise,” Hannibal said gently, and the tears stood in Will’s eyes once more. He fought then down with an effort, and was proud that when he spoke, his voice emerged quite level. “Why do you do it? Hold séances, I mean.” His voice sharpened, became almost accusatory. “I don’t think you believe in them at all.” He thinks back to the beginning of the séance, his mind serving up the minor signs of contempt as connections fell into place. The way Hannibal had smiled so ironically at him lingered in his mind. The ironic way he bowed to Madame Dimoupoulos, holding the pose just a shade too long for respect. He resented Hannibal; couldn’t help but feel that Will’s own weakness and horror were his responsibility, and it intensified the hostility of his voice even as rationality told Will, feebly, that it was hardly the other man’s fault.

“It is true that I did not believe in Madame Dimoupoulos,” Hannibal agreeded. “That does not translate into a disbelief in the premises – as you yourself have so amply proved.”

Will deflated, anger’s faint strength draining quickly from him. What was he to say to that? “Miss Bloom told me you trained as a doctor,” Will muttered. “I would have expected more scepticism.”

“Like Miss Bloom herself?” Hannibal asked. “It is my belief that the scientist should investigate and question. We know, in many ways, that there are things which our current senses do not permit us. Animals, for instance, perceive sound and smell in ways that we can but dream of. I am told, by a friend, that dogs dream in scent. Is it that hard, then, to imagine that some of us are born with a stranger acuity?”

Will remained silent. To speak would have been to make dangerous confessions, because he *wanted* to tell Hannibal. But such words, once spoken, were beyond recall.

“Eat your food, Mr Graham.” Hannibal rose from the chair. “You shall stay for the night – no, I will accept no protest,” he added, seeing Will begin to speak. “Only ring if you need anything. I bid you goodnight – we shall speak more on the morrow.”

Will ate, and after a while a neatly dressed housemaid came to take the tray and to put a hot water bottle in bed beside him, and to smile and curtsey and say goodnight. Will turned his face to the wall, so that he would not have to see if anything stood in the doorway, and pushed himself laboriously towards sleep.

In the morning, the same little housemaid woke him with fresh clothes for him – finer than anything Will had ever worn – and invited him down to breakfast. Will went with more alacrity than ever – sleep had refreshed his mind, and the policeman in him was hungry to discover more about this house and its enigmatic owner.

Breakfast was served intimately, the two of them clustered at one end of the long table. Hannibal was neatly turned out in a dressing gown, hair already immaculately combed. The servants set down plates of scrambled eggs, sausage and a bowl of kedgeree, all of which were steaming faintly with heat. Will's stomach rumbled, and Hannibal smiled.

"I trust you slept well, Mr Graham. Would you like coffee?"

"Yes, please." Will seated himself and watched as his host took up the silver service. The coffee that was poured was rich and dark. "This, Mr Graham, is Villalobos. First brought by Dutch traders to the East Indies in the 1600s, the plant has flourished in the tropics. It has touches of fruit it in, and its taste varies subtly depending on the soil it finds itself planted in."

"Is that supposed to be a veiled reference to me?" Will demanded.

Hannibal's lips quirked upwards faintly. "You are very direct."

"Some people call it rude."

"Rudeness is a deformation of the character. It is like root rot on the coffee plants – they call it *armillaria*, and it can break a farmer and his crops from the inside out. You, I think, use rudeness as a defense mechanism. You resort to it when you feel threatened."

Will said nothing.

"Do I threaten you, Mr Graham?" And the question seemed, on the surface of it, ludicrous – here, in this sunlit room with the trappings of civilisation all around them, with breakfast and coffee and the fine white linen of the tablecloths – but something in Hannibal's gaze invited Will to take it seriously.

"You have an unusually threatening house," Will pointed out, dodging the question. *Don't think I've forgotten what I saw,* he doesn't say, but Hannibal understands the request for more information.

"When I first purchased this house, Mr Graham, I was told that it had a dark and enigmatic history," Hannibal said, as Will pops a bite of sausage into his mouth. His eyes rounded with surprise. "This is delicious," he blurted.

Hannibal looked pleased. "Thank you. But the house, as I was saying, was sold to me surprisingly cheaply, and I was told that the lord and lady of the house were retiring to the countryside with their adult son."

A chill began to creep down Will's spine.

"In my travels, I have learnt to distrust a bargain," Hannibal continued. "As I have learnt to distrust luxury."

Will's eyebrows rose towards his hairline, and he gestured at his surroundings.

"The trappings of wealth," Hannibal dismissed. "I have slept on riverbanks and under the linden trees of Europe, and dug foxholes for myself in the snows outside St. Petersburg, as

the Alaskan dogs do. And there is as much warmth to be found from the harsh vodka that the commoners drink as there is in the finest brandy."

Even as Hannibal spoke, it was almost as though a faint chill descended on the room, demanding its due from the plush environment that surrounded them. Will took a bite of eggs and washed it down with coffee to stave off a sudden shiver. "So you were suspicious that the house was going cheaply."

"Very much so," Hannibal replied. "And the story behind it is not at all enigmatic, merely dark."

"It was something to do with the son," Will whispered.

"Yes." Hannibal shrugged expressively. "He had, it seems, perverse tastes – he had taken to eating human flesh of late, especially that of young children."

The room spun at Hannibal's words and Will braced his head on his hands, dropping the cutlery with a clatter as he gasped. So that little girl, and her terrified face –

"Oh god," he gasped out.

"I suspect that is what his parents said, the old lord and lady, when they found out. And how could they not? After they started to find the little clean-picked bones in the garbage, and the servants crept away one by one, disturbed by their suspicions and fears. And yet they did not care enough to have their son reported and their name sullied by such scandal, of course. So they did the next best thing – they left, to the countryside, vowing that they would keep a closer eye on their son, and sold their townhouse to a clueless foreigner with a title."

"Not clueless, clearly," Will murmured. No one who had ever met dark-eyed Hannibal could ever think he was clueless. "Did they succeed in keeping an eye on their son, then?"

"In the Far East I once met a woman of Indian extraction, who killed tigers and other dangerous beasts – magnificent animals, all of them vicious." Hannibal sliced neatly through a sausage to punctuate his point. Will stayed silent, waiting for the point of the non sequitur. "She said that the Bay of Bengal hosted a tigress and her sub-adult cub, and that in the course of years they had killed almost a hundred people, and dined on their flesh. Eventually a terrified village put out a pair of children as bait and hired her to kill the tigers before they could kill the children. And she succeeded – she was a very talented hunter, and the children were unscathed. And the village was grateful, so they feted her with twelve slaughtered goats, and rice, and wine, and spread her name far and wide. And she is always in demand in her native region, because of this simple fact: once an animal has had a taste of human flesh, *they do not go back*."

Will gripped his knife and fork more tightly. "How long ago was this? Where is this man now?" His mind was already racing ahead – Hannibal Lecter hadn't been in London *that* long. This must have been reasonably recent: that Scotland Yard had let this go unnoticed was unacceptable –

“The name of the huntress was Kali, and she told me that she had named herself after a goddess of destruction and death. And I learned a great deal from her, about tracking and hunting wild creatures.”

Will stilled. “Are you telling me what I think you are?”

Hannibal’s smile was faint and polite as ever. “And if I were?”

“Will they ever find proof?”

“Proof is a very tedious thing, I find. The important thing is to know. And now you know.”

“Only because you told me.”

“You saw the girl,” Hannibal said quietly. “She was the last victim. I told you because you needed to know. And because you need to hear that your sight is worth trusting. It may be of use to you in future.”

Will sagged in his seat, suddenly exhausted. It was true – the tension that had lain coiled within him all along seemed somehow lessened now. Hannibal Lecter was different. He was no Jack Crawford, full of scepticism at Will’s abilities and instincts.

Will was not mad.

“So why is she still here?”

“She will always be here now. Her horror ties her here, and it is hard to let go of fear.” Hannibal said. “Maybe one day I will be able to tell her what I have done, and then she too will know.”

“How can you *live* here, with her?” Will demanded. *How can you bear to see her?* he wanted to ask, because now he was now sure that Hannibal could.

“It is pleasant to be reminded of why I do the things I do,” Hannibal answered, still serenely eating his breakfast.

“And why is that?” Will asked again, softly this time, his hands limp at his sides.

“Why, Mr Graham – because I have the taste for it, of course.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes: this chapter involves mention of child cannibalism, which is not done by Hannibal, but rather by a sadist who used to own his home. The séance is, of course, false, but because our Will is a special snowflake, he sees echoes of that horrifying event, and quite rightly freaks out before demanding answers from Hannibal; Hannibal quite rightly tells Will that he killed the man in question, and subtly challenges Will to

report him. Will refrains and Hannibal is well pleased by all this: in return he leads Will gently down the garden path towards the real killer of Lilly Baines, or The Girl who Cut off her Nose to Spite her Face.

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